

Celebrating Our 50th Anniversary!



ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE HITCHCOCK®

NOVEMBER 2006

Amos Walker wonders
if a disgraced cop can return
to **Square One**

by LOREN D.
ESTLEMAN



\$3.99 U.S. / \$4.99 CAN.



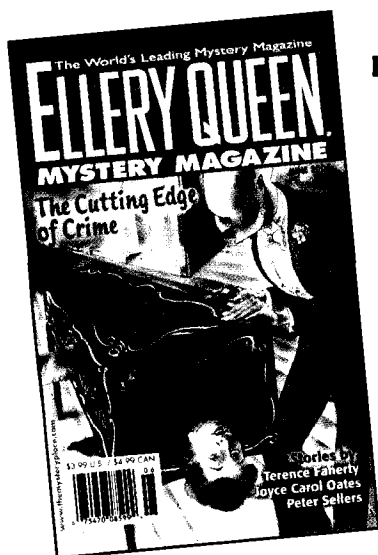
www.TheMysteryPlace.com

Plus:
Rex Burns
R.T. Lawton
Margaret Maron

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

6 Issues, Just \$10.97!

Subscribe today and get 6 intriguing mystery magazines delivered to your door at half-off the regular newsstand price!



Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine leads the genre in critical acclaim with more than 50 major awards and nominations just since 1990!

Every issue delivers suspenseful stories from the honor roll of mystery and crime fiction's great writers PLUS mystery limericks, poems and cartoons, book reviews, and an occasional mystery crossword!

Order Today and Save 50%!

To charge your order to MC or Visa, call
TOLL-FREE 1-800-220-7443
(8am-7pm EST) Orders only, please!



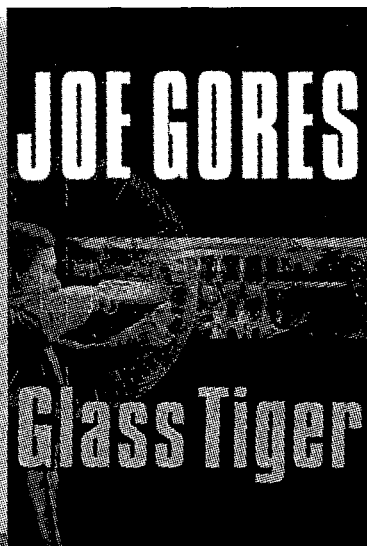
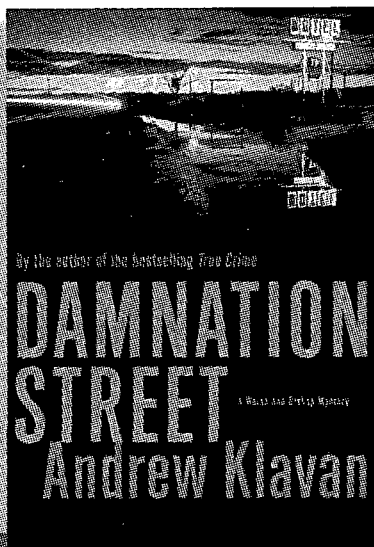
**Ellery Queen, Suite S, 6 Prowitt St.
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220**

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside U.S.A.: Add \$5 per year for shipping and handling. All orders must be paid in U.S. funds. *We publish double issues twice a year which count as four issues toward your subscription. Offer expires 12/31/07.

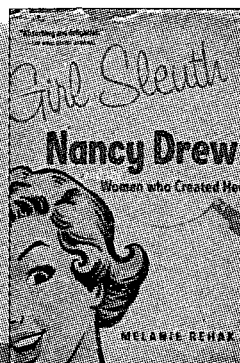
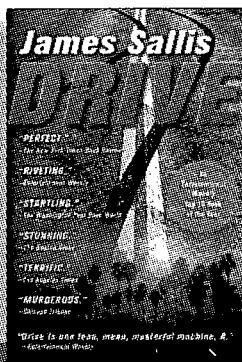
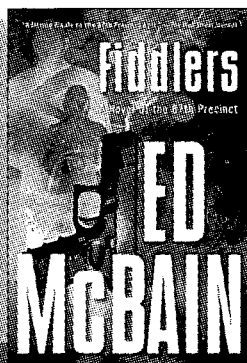
56C-NZQDLL

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What to Read Next?



NEW FROM OTTO PENZLER BOOKS



NEW IN PAPERBACK

Mystery solved.

 **Harcourt**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG www.HarcourtBooks.com

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



C CONTENTS

November 2006

Cover by Michael Gibbs

FICTION

- 4 COUNTING COUP by Brian Thornton
- 16 EVEN THE LEAST by Janet Nodar
- 23 SUDDEN STOP by Mitch Alderman
- 40 IN A CIVILIZED MANNER by Rex Burns
- 62 SQUARE ONE by Loren D. Estleman
- 68 THE CASE OF THE OLYMPIC CUP by Joe Helgersen
- 94 PROUD MARY by Harriet Rzetelny
- 112 RANSOM by R. T. Lawton

AHMM CLASSIC

- 130 MY MOTHER, MY DAUGHTER, ME by Margaret Maron

DEPARTMENTS

- 3 EDITOR'S NOTES
- 22 SOLUTION to the October Dying Words
- 58 BOOKED & PRINTED by Robert C. Hahn
- 93 MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH
- 110 UNSOLVED by Robert V. Kesling
- 126 REEL CRIME by Steve Hockensmith
- 140 THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER by Willie Rose
- 141 THE STORY THAT WON

Visit us online at www.TheMysteryPlace.com!

Indicia on page 143

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

MADISON MADNESS

As September rolls to an end, we head to Madison, Wisconsin, for Bouchercon, the 37th annual convention for mystery lovers and writers. Bouchercon is a large convention—overwhelming at times—but for three days straight we get to talk mystery and mingle with the stars of the field. This year's honorees include Robert B. Parker, Nevada Barr, and M. C. Beaton, and the fan guest of honor is Jim Huang, the proprietor of The Mystery Company bookstore in Carmel, Indiana, and publisher of Crum Creek Press and *The Dood Review*, whom we profiled in November 2003.

Numerous awards are handed out at Bouchercon, and it happens that a number of AHMM stories have been nominated for honors this year. Three stories are finalists for a Shamus award, presented by the Private Eye Writers of America: Jeremiah Healy's "Two Birds with One Stone" (January/February 2005), Steve Hockensmith's "The Big Road" (May 2005), and Michael Wiecek's "A Death in Ueno" (March 2005).

Two stories have been nominated for a Barry award, presented by *Deadly Pleasures* magazine (www.deadlypleasures.com): "The Big Road" and Tom Savage's "The Method in Her Madness" (June 2005).

And finally, "The Big Road" was also nominated for a Macavity award, presented by Mystery Readers International (www.mysteryreaders.org). In addition, a new category of Macavity award, the Sue Feder Historical Mystery Novel, has a familiar name on its shortlist—Rhys Bowen's novel *In Like Flynn*, featuring the irrepressible P.I. Molly Murphy in turn-of-the-century New York.

Kudos also to Joe Helgersson ("The Case of the Olympic Cup"), who will publish this September a YA novel set a little north of Sheriff Huck's stretch of the Mississippi river, titled *Horns and Wrinkles* (Houghton Mifflin).

We're pleased to introduce a new author with this issue. Brian Thornton ("Counting Coup") is a history teacher in the Seattle area and is the author of *101 Things You Didn't Know About Lincoln* (Adams Media, 2005). Mr. Thornton's interests include the outdoors, history, art, literature, musical theater, and "baseball, baseball, baseball!" Mr. Thornton will be one of the many authors in attendance at Bouchercon.

Congratulations to all our nominees!

COUNTING COUP

BRIAN THORNTON

Wash and Chance made it over the rise and into the valley of the Gallatin just ahead of that storm. It had taken three days of hard riding to get to the railhead, and the horses were all but played out.

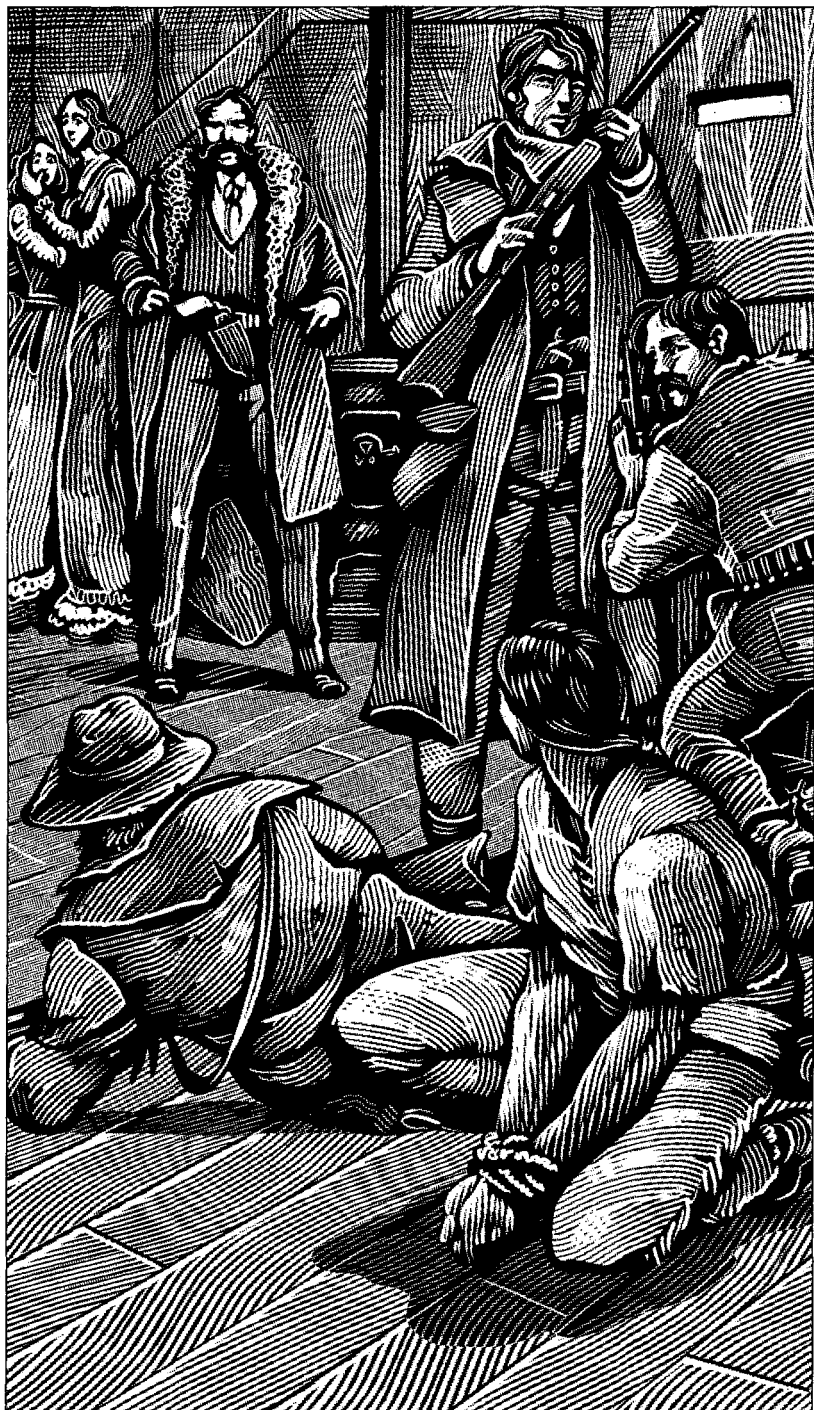
The entire last day finished setting their nerves on edge. What with the smoke signals and the tracks of all of the unshod ponies they'd seen, there was enough sign to make a body think he was riding right through the heart of the Cheyenne Nation.

Stretching away to the north and south below them lay the broad flood plain of the Gallatin. The river itself meandered along the valley floor, with the more slender, silver ribbon of rail line mirroring it, running off forever in either direction. The reds of the tamarack and the golds of the aspen and the greens of the fir created a burst of color on the hills that flanked the river on either side, their hues all the more vivid when set against the white of the previous evening's uncharacteristically early snowfall.

The only sign of human habitation aside from the rail line was the Great Northern Depot, its outbuildings, and the large water tower that was the reason for the depot's placement there in that remote fastness where plains met mountains. Gold strikes farther up in the hills near the territorial capital of Virginia City made it profitable during the previous year or so for the railroad to run a spur line south from its main line where it passed through Helena.

"I wonder whether there'll be a train through here before that storm hits," Wash said, as he put heels to his big bay gelding, leading the way off the crest of the ridgeline and down into the valley.

For the first time in days, Chance uncocked the carbine he'd been carrying propped just behind his saddle horn. "No idee." Chance had wondered that himself for the past several hours, turning in his saddle periodically to look over his shoulder at the roiling mass of clouds directly behind them. Horses being herd animals, Chance's buckskin mare took it on her own volition to follow Wash's bay down the trail in the direction of the Great Northern's Gallatin River Depot.



They rode on in exhausted silence for over an hour, picking their way down the hillside, letting their mounts do most of the work. The trail crossed the Gallatin at a shallow ford less than three hundred feet south of the train depot's main building.

That ford and the traffic it represented were the major reasons the railroad had chosen this spot on which to build. The Gallatin River site was the sole entrepôt and watering station for fifty miles in either direction along this spur line. As such, it was usually a popular destination for miners down from the hills after having found enough color to get themselves a bath and a taste of whiskey, not necessarily in that order.

A light wind had kicked up by the time they made it across the river. It was late afternoon now, with the accompanying lengthening of the shadows and the resultant drop in temperature. They tied their horses to a rail on the south side of the main building.

The Great Northern Railroad's Gallatin River Railway Station consisted of a single, substantial high-ceilinged room. The baggage counter at the north end doubled as a bar between trains and as a supper table during mealtimes. The shutters on the windows were closed up, and a large fire crackled and popped in a river rock hearth at the south end of the fifty foot by thirty foot room. Several straight-backed wooden chairs and two small homemade tables completed the utilitarian complement of furniture in the place.

There were five people already in the room when Wash and Chance walked in. Off to one side a medicine drummer sat using a stub of pencil to tally his wares, his supply case across his lap doubling for a writing table.

Seated close to the fire were two women, one middle aged, the other in the first blush of maidenhood, both in eastern dress and clearly escorted by a middle-aged man in a duded-up eastern suit.

The fellow's mustache bore a liberal amount of wax, and his careful eyes studied Wash and Chance from beneath the sweep of his broad, flat-brimmed hat as the two men strode through the door and up to the baggage counter-cum-bar.

Behind the counter stood the fifth and final person in the room, a Great Northern employee known to Chance only as "Deacon." Whether this moniker signified some deep religious conviction on the man's part, was an actual title, or a first, middle, or last name, Chance didn't know. If Wash knew, he kept mum about it.

"Washburn!" the little man crowed, touching the bill of the conductor's cap he never seemed to remove from his head. "And young John T. Chance!"

Chance had heard once that Deacon's cap was a permanent fixture covering his pate because he'd been scalped and left for

dead by some Piegan braves-up on the Clark Fork back in the thirties. At that time, there was still beaver to be fought over, and Deacon was a mountain man running traps through Blackfoot country, risking his skin for pelts. Of course, Chance didn't know for sure if the story was true. Wash had known Deacon a long time, but Chance never bothered to ask him about it. Wash kept mum on most things.

"Deacon," Wash's long face broke into a grin as he laid his rifle, bedroll, and saddlebags on the bar, "have a drink with us?"

Deacon reached beneath the bar, pulled a bottle, and blew dust off it. "I will at that, Wash. And since us drinkin' together is such a rare and precious thing, the first one is on the house."

Wash's grin widened into a smile as he doffed his hat and shucked his sheepskin, placing them both on the bar next to his other belongings. "Fire's a mighty welcome sight. Got any coffee to go with that nip?" Deacon stepped off to fetch it.

Chance had already dropped his own set of possibles on the bar and was hard at work shrugging his way out of his coat, straightening his clothes, removing his hat, and trying to smooth out the tangled shock of hair beneath it. He snuck a look at the maiden at the table as he did so.

When Deacon returned with two tin cups of coffee for the both of them, Wash said, "Thankee. You're a prince, Deacon."

Chance bellied up to the bar, picked up his coffee with both hands, and said, "When's the next train north to Helena due in?"

Deacon produced a pocket watch from his worn leather miner's vest and said, "Oh, 'bout four hours, if'n the weather holds." He looked past Chance's shoulder and out through the glass in the big door at the clouds coming down over the ridgeline. "More like it'll be tomorry, mebbe day after that, afore the next northbound makes it up here from Virginia City, depending on how much snow she's got to git through." He poured three glasses full from the bottle. "Once she does get in here, might just quit this job and light out myself, what with the Cheyennes bein' all riled up. Our cook, the smith we just hired on, the grooms, all gone yesterday. Hopped a southbound headed for Virginia City, I reckon."

"We saw a powerful lot of sign," Chance said.

Wash grunted in agreement as he took a sip of his coffee. Reaching for his glass, he said, "Seems as if Yellowneck and Silvertip have the Powder River Cheyennes stirred up again."

"They're all riled up, all along the line through this territory and on east to the Dakotas," Deacon said. "Sioux whupped Miles at the Rosebud a couple of months back, so now they're all talkin' about 'heap big medicine' and paintin' up."

Chance said, "Ain't it kind of late in the year for Cheyenne Dog Soldiers to be out raidin'?"

Before either of the other men could answer, a fourth voice, one with a deep Southern accent, said, "Gentlemen, your conversation is distressing the ladies."

Chance turned his head and saw that the dude with the big hat was standing right behind them. The man was a full head shorter than Chance's six feet, and he stood with hands at his sides, his highly polished black boots spread wide apart. Chance wondered about this odd posture until he noticed the silver inlaid butt of the pistol peeking out from behind the front of the dude's frock coat.

Wash must have noticed the pistol. Wash noticed everything. "Well, mister, I can certainly understand why it would. The thought of runnin' into a Cheyenne war party has been distressin' me since my partner and I pulled stakes a few days back and made our way here."

That seemed to throw the fellow. He opened his mouth to respond to Wash, but was interrupted by a series of sharp explosions. The young woman at the table sprang to her feet and asked loudly, "What was that?"

Every man in the room knew what that was, Chance included. Rifle shots. As if by a prearranged signal, Chance and Wash both snatched their weapons off the bar and hurried to shuttered windows on either side of the big door, which Deacon quickly shuttered and bolted.

Peering through the murder hole in the heavy wooden shutter, Chance spied the source of the rifle fire. Two men on horseback had just finished fording the river, maybe a hundred yards ahead of a fully dressed-out war party of at least a dozen Indians. It was twilight by now, and the storm he and Wash had run from all day had finally caught up with them, so between it and the failing daylight, Chance was unable to make out anything more about them than that. Then he heard them, faintly at first: the *Yip-yip-yip* of the Cheyenne Dog Soldier. They were armed with rifles and firing from the opposite bank of the Gallatin as the two figures they were pursuing made for the front door of the depot.

Off to Chance's right, Wash's big Sharps roared, eliciting a frightened shriek from one of the women. Chance took aim with his Spencer and fired off three quick shots over the heads of those braves where they had reined in their ponies on the opposite bank.

"I've got the door in the back out to the cookhouse bolted and barred," Deacon said from somewhere behind Chance. "Three-inch-thick Doug Fir, nothing they've got'll break through that!"

Wash said, "Three shots is enough, boy." Only Wash could get

away with calling Chance that. "I reckon you had the good sense to fire over their heads?"

"With a carbine, what prayer did I really have of hitting 'em in the first place, Wash?" Chance grinned crookedly at him just as Deacon pulled the bolt and let in the two men who had so narrowly escaped the clutches of the Indians on the other side of the Gallatin moments before.

As the door swung open, Chance saw for the first time that one of them, the one who tumbled in first, was an Indian himself. His hands tied behind him, he sprawled face down at the feet of the older of the two women, who in her turn began to scream lustily. Close on his heels came a mountain of a man, half a head taller than Chance, dressed in buckskins himself, only his broad-brimmed hat, army-issue boots, and full dark beard set him apart as a white man.

The big man looked neither to right nor to left, reaching his prisoner (for that he clearly was), and using one meaty paw, began to manhandle him roughly to his feet. By now Deacon had rebolted the door, with the drummer having dropped his inventory and joined the knot of people gathered near it. Wash still had his eyes peeled through the murder hole in the window he was manning.

Chance looked at the girl again, as he had several times already. She was staring in fascination at the Cheyenne warrior, her blue eyes round, her mouth a small *o*, her hands clasped together and twisting to and fro. She held herself quite erect, but Chance could tell from the stiffness of her posture that she was afraid. The older woman clutched the younger woman's arm directly above the elbow. She would look at the Indian, then hide her face in the girl's shoulder, then start the process all over again.

Their would-be protector, he of the fancy mustache, pistol rig, and Southern accent, also gazed fixedly in the direction of the recently entered captive, on his face a look of wonderment. His jaw hung slack, his eyes bulged from their sockets. His whole frame shook with a violence that had been entirely absent from his manner when he'd been facing down Wash, Chance, and Deacon mere moments before.

Chance sidled over to Wash, poked him, and murmured, "Take a lookee there. Think any of those three have ever laid eyes on an Injun before?" Wash grunted something Chance didn't catch, and never stopped peering out into the snowstorm.

"At least we don't have to worry about them trying to burn us out," he said. "What with this snowfall, the roof'll be too wet for them to get a spark goin' on."

"This murderin' skunk," said the bearded giant, addressing them all

for the first time, "is goin' back to Virginia City with me, so's the territorial marshal can give him a fair trial and then give him the hangin' he deserves, all fit and legal." He sounded as if he'd just stepped off the farm in southern Missouri, his speech filled with all of the broad, flat vowel sounds of that region. "Anyone here goin' to contest my right to the bounty money?" He shook the Indian in his clutches for emphasis, then set to work binding the hapless fellow hand and foot and lashing him to one of the posts that supported the roof.

The Indian must have had all of the fight pounded out of him, because he stood straight and tall, making barely a move while his captor set about securing his bonds. An old burn scar peeked out from beneath his unbraided black hair, running in a sallow path along the side of his throat, terminating just beneath his chin and in front of his left ear. The proud countenance above that ochre blaze was bruised and cut, with one eye swollen shut, but the other one, piercing and black, fixed on the blond locks of the girl so stock still less than ten feet away from him.

"What did the varmint do?" asked the drummer. He was a short, bandy-legged fellow with a diffident manner, clothes ill-fitting and threadbare, hardly the picture of a successful salesman.

"Do?" That bear of a man wheeled on him. "Why, he was born!" he thundered. "And God or the Devil himself made him an Injun, and a murderin', thievin' skunk, at that!" The drummer cringed and backed away.

"I wouldn't worry about the murderin' devil in here, if'n I were you, hoss," Wash said without looking over his shoulder. "I'd worry about the murderin' devils out there."

"What's so all-fired important about one hostile anyhow?" Deacon asked.

"Who'd he kill?" Chance asked.

"What's it matter?" the big man growled. "He's my prisoner. All Cheyennes are murderin', thievin', scalpin', rapin' savages."

The conversation ended there. Chance wanted to pursue the matter further, but a particular look from Wash cut him off as he was drawing breath for his next response. Deacon had already drifted off to take stock of their supplies, in anticipation of a potentially lengthy stay within the walls of the depot.

A check of the telegraph lines revealed that they weren't working. A look through one of the murder holes confirmed that the horses were no longer in the corral. The snow began to fall harder. Inside, things were still. Outside, an owl that was no owl hooted. There was no sign of the train from Virginia City.

Wash insisted that they needed someone positioned in four vantage points, one each to watch for hostile activity to the north,

east, and south. With Deacon manning his scattergun behind the baggage claim counter, he also commanded a view of the bolted and barred back door on the west side of the building.

Wash, Chance, and the drummer split the other three directions between them, with Chance watching to the north, Wash covering the front door with his Sharps, and the drummer peering out to the south, in the direction of the now-empty corral. It didn't occur to them that the big man would have the slightest interest in pitching in. Later, when the need for sleep prevailed upon them, Wash said he would take the first watch, then wake Chance, and so on.

By this point the sun had set and it was dark. The Southern gentleman had regained the composure he'd lost upon the advent of the bounty hunter with his Indian captive and began to talk. Chance listened as the fellow engaged Wash in conversation, revealing that he was a Mississippi plantation owner and a Confederate officer who served with Quantrill's Raiders in the late unpleasantness between the States. The war had ruined him, as it had so many others, and he was currently occupied working as a Pinkerton detective, with the assignment of escorting the young lady and her maiden aunt back East for some such reason or other. Wash gave every impression of listening, grunting in all the right spots, as the fellow talked and talked.

"Gone to pieces," Chance said to himself. "Shows himself capable of staring down a roomful of men one minute, and the next, he's fast-talking to someone he doesn't even know, and all over his first sight of an Injun."

"Dude," Chance muttered aloud, eyes focused on the darkness outside.

"Hardly," came a low, pleasant voice at his shoulder.

Chance turned and looked. It was the girl. She stood a few feet behind him and off to his right. He had been so absorbed in the conversation her erstwhile protector was attempting to have with Wash that he had missed her approach entirely.

"Oh, I wasn't speaking about you, ma'am," Chance said self-consciously.

She seemed amused by that. "I know." She met his gaze evenly. Chance looked away. Then she said, "Do you know what will happen to the Indian once he's taken to Virginia City?"

"It's not certain that he'll be taken there," Chance said diffidently, conscious of how shabby and disheveled he looked in the presence of this Eastern girl. "There's a war party out there bent on loosing him, and they may just have something to say about it, ma'am."

"Oh," she said, and began to gnaw at her lower lip, eyes on the floor. "I just think it wrong to hang a man for no reason."

"Hopefully the Cheyennes outside feel the same way about killing us to get to him." The girl paled at that suggestion, and Chance immediately regretted saying it. "I'm sorry, ma'am, I'm sure there's nothing to fear. We're well armed and well provisioned . . ." Then he trailed off, not knowing what to say next.

If she noticed how awkward he was around her, she gave no indication. She stayed there with him for over half an hour, asking him myriad questions about himself, about Wash, about the country, the Cheyennes, everything. He willingly answered her questions, each in turn.

The scream brought Chance awake and to his feet, carbine at the ready. The big room was dimly lit by a single candle. One of the women was standing over the spot where the Indian had been tied up earlier that evening. Deacon, the drummer, and the other woman (Chance couldn't make out which was which in the low light of the candle) were hurrying over to join her.

Heart hammering, Chance looked to both exits. Neither was open, although the bar was missing from the front door. Then catching Wash's eye, he lifted his shoulders quizzically. Wash reached over and thumbed the lock on the front door, replaced the bar, and then motioned silently for Chance to join him by the door.

"Back my play," Wash said. "This is liable to get ugly."

"What's—"

"Not now."

Deacon lit another candle, and then a hurricane lamp for good measure. The fire had burned down, so the room was cold. Deacon started stoking the fire, shivering as he did so.

Now that it was lighter in the room, Chance could see what had given the older woman (for it was she) cause to scream. Next to the beam to which the bounty hunter had tied his captive earlier in the evening lay the body of the Pinkerton detective.

His vest was askew, his shirt covered with blood. His eyes were glassy and open, and his countenance was set with the finality of death, lips drawn back from his teeth. The holster on his belt was empty. In his hand he clutched a crimson scrap of fabric. Wash knelt close to him. "He's still warm," he said.

"If he weren't dead, I'd kill him myself." Chance took note of the bearded ruffian with the Missouri twang for the first time since waking. He was hunkered on the other side of the beam from where Wash crouched. "He let the redskin loose and cost me my bounty."

Wash straightened, turned, and faced the fellow. "I've got a

might of difficulty with that statement," he said deliberately. "Well, actually, I've got two differences with that statement."

The man mountain before him drew himself up to his full height, beard bristling, a pistol appearing as if by magic in his fist. Chance covered him with the carbine as Wash continued to speak, slowly, not moving. "First off, put that hogleg away. I don't know how fast you are, but whether you get me or not, the boy over there—" He cocked his head in Chance's direction. "—will more than likely get you. There's no way you get the both of us."

They stood like that for a number of heartbeats. Out of the corner of his eye, Chance saw both women and the drummer join Deacon behind the baggage counter. He was comforted by the sound of both hammers on the sawed-off that Deacon kept behind the bar being cocked.

"And if you're fast enough to get the both of them," the station attendant drawled, "Betsy here'll hole you up somethin' awful. Wash, it's your play. Time you made it."

The big fellow looked sidewise at Deacon. Chance's palms began to sweat. He licked his lips while he kept the carbine trained on the man's beard. After a few more breaths, the bounty hunter uncocked his pistol and dropped the hand holding it to his side.

"My first problem," Wash began, "is with the notion that this here Pinkerton man let your prisoner go."

"What of it?"

"I know he didn't."

"How?"

"Because I was the one who did."

Chance thought the big man was going to shoot Wash just for spite when he heard that. It surprised him when the fellow didn't do more than glare. Apparently, between his own carbine and Deacon's scattergun, they had managed to convince that bearded giant to think before acting.

"When?"

"Midway through my watch, once everyone was bedded down. You were snoring loudest."

"Why?"

"Because it made no sense to hold on to a Cheyenne war chief with a dozen of his young bucks out there intent on picking us off till they freed him."

"War chief?!" the girl exclaimed. The big man didn't move.

"Did you notice that discolored scar on his throat?" Wash said. "How sallow it was in comparison to the rest of his skin?"

"Yellowneck," Deacon said low and soft.

"Yellowneck," Wash said. "But this wasn't about Yellowneck. Oh,

it might have been until he got him here and saw our Mississippi Pinkerton friend. After that, everything changed.

"Chance, do remember what you said about the dead man when our bounty-hunting friend here shoved Yellowneck through the doorway?"

"Something about him seeming pretty spooked, all of a sudden, like he'd never seen an Injun before."

"That's right. Now, I didn't see his face because I was watching this gent—" Wash indicated the giant before him with a nod of his head. "—as he came through the door. And *his* face showed one thing before he was able to mask it. Surprise."

"So Mr. Hackett was frightened by the sight of this man," the girl said, "and not of the Indian?"

"Judging from the way everyone was standing when those two came through the front door, that's the way it plays out."

"But why?"

"The better question would be to ask him why he killed your Mr. Hackett after Hackett relieved me earlier this evening," Wash said. "If I had to guess, I'd say it had something to do with Quantrill's Raiders and the war. See the piece of red silk clutched here in the dead man's hand?" Wash pointed. "Quantrill's boys wore red silk sashes because they were irregular cavalry with no set uniform. Hackett mentioned riding with Quantrill."

"Not that he needed to. I knew by the butt of the pistol he had. That silver-chased grip? I saw its like before, when Union troops I scouted for took a couple of them off of captured Quantrill officers. Now I ask you, Mr. Bounty Hunter, just where did you get yours?" Wash motioned toward the pistol the big man held stiffly at his side. "Didja take it off of Hackett after you knifed him, or did you already have one of your own?"

The big man raised that pistol and pointed it at Wash for an answer.

"Hackett had his when he came to me earlier this evening and offered to take the second watch. Said he was ashamed over how he'd gone all soft earlier in the day. Looking back, I'm betting he didn't plan on getting a wink of sleep with you in the depot. Guess I should have known better. As it was, I was preoccupied with the hope that no one would notice that our captive was nothing more than a carefully arranged pile of blankets, at least until daylight, so I didn't think overly much on it. Maybe if I had, the poor fellow would still be alive."

Hackett's killer finally found his voice. "He deserved everything he got, by God! Back in '64, that coward ran from a fight and left eighteen men, including me, to rot in a Union prison camp! I

couldn't believe I'd found him, and I knew from the look in his eyes that he recognized me, even after all these years, and even with the beard. So I waited for my chance, pretended sleep, saw you free Yellowneck and thought about stopping you, then realized it could be made to work for me." The man's diction had changed completely. Although he still spoke with the flat vowels of the southern Missouri hills, he had dropped the banter of the uneducated border ruffian he had successfully played for the better part of the day.

"Then that lily-livered snake asked you if he could have the next watch, and I knew it was him or me. So when the light went down, I slipped over behind the bar, and when he walked up to the window next to it, I stuck him. And I'd do it again too. He needed killing!"

"That wasn't for you to say," Wash said quietly.

"If you try to take me, I'll kill at least one of you."

"I know," Wash said.

"There's another way," the big man said. "Let me walk out of here and take my chances with Yellowneck and his Dog Soldiers."

Chance heard the girl gasp. He was uneasy about those two choices himself.

"What's it going to be?" Wash said. "Chance? Deacon?"

"Let him go," they both said together.

Wash stood aside for the big fellow as he pulled his hat on and picked up his rifle. "Why take his pistol?" Wash asked as that mountain of a man moved past him to the door. "And why leave that scrap of red silk?"

The fellow unbarred the door. "Counting coup," he said, then pulled the door open, hefted his rifle in his left hand, thumbed back the hammer on the pistol he had taken from the man he'd killed earlier in the evening, and stepped out into the storm.

Chance moved quickly to bar the door behind him. Outside, an owl that was no owl hooted, answered by the call of a coyote that was no coyote. Then the shots began to ring out. Chance counted no less than ten of them before the return of a deafening silence.

The girl, her voice tight, said, "What did he mean by 'counting coup'?"

"It's like taking scalps," Deacon, the scalped man, said, "but less permanent. It shows you bested an enemy."

"How did you know it was Yellowneck he had when he came in here, Wash?" Chance asked.

Wash smiled for the first time in a long time. "Well, youngster, just who do you suppose it was gave him that scar in the first place?"

EVEN THE LEAST

JANET NODAR

Chief Bowman's perfect solution would have been to line the morons up against the trailer and shoot them. No doubt he felt constrained by the presence of six sheriff's deputies and a couple of space-suited loaners from the Mobile P.D. hazmat team, not to mention his own officers. Processing the suspects and breaking down the meth lab would eat up the rest of the afternoon, and Bowman loathed having his time wasted this way. He pivoted on his walking stick. "Jaramillo!" he shouted. "Where the hell is the social worker?"

"On her way, Chief." Kristal was bored. And hot. Sweat trickled down her back, pooled at her belt. Like her chief, she was sick to death of crankheads. Busting up meth labs no longer held her interest. This particular trailer sat in an airless space cut out of the piney woods west of Cat Bait Bayou, at the end of a rutted red dirt road now filled with official vehicles.

The girl they'd found in the trailer along with the older perps was sitting in the back of Kristal's patrol car, the door open, one flip-flopped foot resting on the doorjamb, the other curled underneath her body. She picked restlessly at the glittering purple nail polish on her fingernails. Bitter Tree P.D. was waiting for a county social worker to take her away. She had said she was eighteen, but none of them believed her. The ID she handed them was not hers; it belonged to the other woman being arrested at the trailer, twenty-three-year-old Brianna Hawkins. No marks for brilliance, then. The next name the girl gave them, Tiffani Shephard, did not pop anything in the system. She wore tiny black, low-slung shorts and a tight T-shirt that bared a pudgy stomach. The words "Sexy and Sweet" were written across her chest in glittering script. Her soft little breasts rose and fell beneath this message. She had a narrow, acne-spotted face that was probably improved when she wore makeup. Her brown hair was pulled back in a clip. A pillow in a filthy SpongeBob case and a battered backpack, stuffed with necessities and stenciled with the word "Tiffani," sat on the seat next to her. The throat-scalding,

tomcat-piss smell of a meth lab coated the sticky air.

Bowman limped toward Kristal. "Take her on into town. The worker can meet you at the station. The hazmat team says we need to evacuate." His words did not contain anger, necessarily, but his manner suggested that he found Kristal irritating because she had to be told what to do. She didn't say anything and began moving in a way that showed she intended to obey him, but Kristal's manner suggested that she thought Bowman was an asshole.

"Want to ride up front with me, Tiffani?" Kristal asked.

The girl shrugged but walked around the car and slid into the front passenger seat, and they bumped down the rutted drive to the graded dirt road that led out of the bayou to the two-lane. Kristal turned the AC up, and in a few moments the car's interior had gone from suffocating to freezing.

"I guess I can't smoke?" Tiffani said.

"Nope."

"Where are we going?"

"The police station in Bitter Tree to meet the social worker. She'll take you—"

"I ain't going with her. I can take care of myself. Let me out at the ZipiMart on 43."

"Oh right," said Kristal, laughing. "I'm so sure."

Tiffani looked offended. "You don't know me," she said. "You don't know nothing about me."

"You'd be surprised," said Kristal. Did she need to go back out to the bust, she wondered. They had plenty of warm bodies at the scene. Maybe she could stay at the station, catch up on some paperwork. "I see girls like you all the time."

"They're not me!"

"They're just like you."

"No, they ain't."

"Do you go to school?"

"No. I hate school. It sucks."

"Why?"

"It sucks."

"And it's all the teachers' fault, right? They're mean. They aren't fair," Kristal said, speaking lightly, keeping the sarcasm she felt out of her voice. "Nothing's ever your fault. Right?"

"It isn't," Tiffani said. "They don't like me. They think I'm stupid."

"Are you?"

Tiffani's eyes cut over to Kristal and away. "No." She did not say this loudly.

"Why do you dress the way you do?" asked Kristal.

"I do what I want."

"What you want."

"That's right."

"You look exactly the same as a million other little sexpots out there," Kristal said. Except you aren't pretty, she added to herself, and some girls are.

Tiffani looked out the window, blinking.

"Can you understand what I'm saying?" Kristal said.

"This isn't how I really look," Tiffani said, her narrow little face still canted toward the window. "I didn't have time to take a shower or put on my makeup."

"Or fix your nail polish."

Tiffani rolled her eyes and stared out her window some more.

Kristal turned right, onto Highway 43. The patrol car was running rough. Probably needed oil. The pine woods thinned, giving way to homes, a smattering of shabby businesses. They crossed the bridge over Cat Bait Creek. "I was teasing," she said.

Tiffani looked at her suspiciously. "I'm out of polish remover."

"That something you use to cook?" Kristal couldn't remember the ingredients for crystal meth right offhand.

"I don't know," Tiffani said.

"'Course not."

"I don't."

"Do you use?" Kristal said.

"No."

"Can I see your teeth?"

"No!"

"What were you doing at that pigsty if you don't use?"

"I've been staying there."

"Why?"

"I've got friends there."

Kristal mentally reviewed the five people they'd arrested at the trailer, four men and a woman, none of whom had shown the slightest interest in Tiffani's fate. "A real caring bunch," she said.

"You don't know anything about it," Tiffani said hotly.

"I'm not blind," said Kristal.

"Do you know what's going to happen to them?"

"Jail."

"For how long?"

A childish question. Kristal looked at Tiffani again. "Hard to say. Which one is he?"

"Huh?"

"Which one is your boyfriend?"

"None of your business," said Tiffani.

"Never mind. You probably don't have one."

"Yes, I do."

"No way."

"I do too. Billy Hawkins."

Kristal couldn't remember which one of the skinny blank-eyed, bad-smelling men at the trailer had been named Hawkins. "That's the same last name as the girl whose ID you gave us. Is she his wife?"

"Nooooo," said Tiffani.

"Did he steal her ID for you?"

"She loaned it to me."

"How generous. What for?"

Tiffani didn't answer.

"Tiffani, where is your mother?" Kristal asked.

"In Florida. She got a job there."

"Why didn't you go with her?"

"I couldn't. She couldn't take me."

"You're a runaway, aren't you?"

"No. Not really," said Tiffani. "I was in a foster home, but it didn't work out. They hated me. They were glad I left. What difference does it make anyway? I can look out for myself."

No look-fors or warrants had dinged when they called Tiffani in. Maybe no one had reported her missing. "Your teachers don't like you, your foster parents don't like you. How come you have so much trouble getting along with people?" Kristal asked her. "What's the story?"

"I don't know," Tiffani said.

"Do you get into fights? Steal things?"

"No!"

"What is it, then?"

"I don't know!" Tiffani said.

"What's your mom's name?"

"Neddie Jakes."

"You said your last name was Shephard."

Tiffani shrugged.

"Where's your dad?"

"Around."

"Around?"

"I won't go to him," Tiffani said flatly.

"Do you know how to find your mom?"

"No."

There was no telling how much of this was true. And all of it was the social worker's problem anyway, not Kristal's. Kristal was mere transportation, point A to point B. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"Liar," said Kristal, but mildly.

They pulled up at the police station, a Gulf Coast cottage on an oak-shaded street a few blocks from Bitter Tree's main square. Behind the cottage was a cinder-block jail, the town's main fire station, a chain-linked compound full of city vehicles, and a cleared and scraped area where the new police station would be built whenever the city had the money, a time difficult to foresee, especially since Hurricane Melvin. The social worker's red sedan was already in the lot.

Kristal had not met the social worker before; she was grayhaired and seemed competent enough, if a little tired, a little bored. They filled out and signed some paperwork and put the girl's things in the back seat and the girl in the front. Kristal sat on the steps of the station's front porch and watched the car leave. Tiffani looked back at Kristal. Her face was a small white oval in the car window, receding.

The day had not cooled, but here in Bitter Tree the air did not stink, and a breeze moved the leaves of the oak trees that shaded the station and the city compound. Kristal knew everything around her intimately; the blocks of houses and churches and businesses and offices that included the police station, the town itself a grid of shady streets centered on the Square, shady streets that eventually ran downhill and abutted the river, the few remaining wharves and shrimp boats, the new condos going up. She knew Bitter Tree down to its concrete sidewalks, poured in the thirties, a WPA project, and patched and repoured ever since, tree roots always twisting ceaselessly beneath them. Not far from where she sat was her parents' farm, her little home, her own young son.

Kristal called the social worker's cell phone. "What will happen to her?" she asked.

"Juvie tonight. I'll see the judge tomorrow."

"Why juvie?"

"Why not? We've got to put her somewhere. She won't tell us how to contact her parents. I can't get hold of her fosters. You picked her up at a meth lab. That hardly sounds promising."

"Let me talk to her for a second, okay?"

"Sure."

"Yeah?" said Tiffani. "What do you want?"

"Don't you want to call your parents? Your mom? Your dad? Otherwise, you're going to end up at Strickland tonight."

"I don't care."

"Do you understand what's going to happen?"

"I've been there before. It's not that bad."

"If you say so," Kristal said.

"I don't know how to find her," Tiffani said. "She went off to Jacksonville. Her cell phone ain't been working. She don't know how to reach me. And I'm not going to my real dad's. They hate me there. He's an asshole. I don't care what you do."

"You don't care?"

"I don't give a flying fuck."

"What's your whole name, Tiffani?" asked Kristal. "Your real name."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Just tell me."

"Tiffani Juliet Jakes."

"Juliet?"

"That's right," she said defensively.

"Tell me the most important thing about you."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, what would you want people to know about you?"

"That I don't take no shit off nobody."

Kristal wanted to laugh. Yes, Tiffani Juliet Jakes, plain little girl whom everyone hates for no reason, runaway girl, sleeping with a crankhead for dope and a place to sleep, young girl whose life is already a rapidly narrowing trap, with your glittery purple nail polish and your filthy SpongeBob pillow case: You're tough.

"No, that's not it. What I mean is, like, what would God say is the most important thing about you?"

"That's stupid."

"No, it isn't."

"Do you pray for people?"

"I'm not very good at that stuff," Kristal said. "But my mama is. She'll pray for you if you want."

"Excuse me while I barf."

"You asked."

"Why do you want to know about me?" Tiffani asked.

"So I won't forget you," said Kristal. "I forget what's important, sometimes. You can think about that, if you want. You can think, well, that one lady cop in Bitter Tree knows about me."

"Whatever," said Tiffani. She was silent for a few seconds. Then she said, "I used to take care of my little brother. I'd make him lunch. Play with him. Show him how to do stuff. I started teaching him how to read. He liked it."

"What happened to him?"

"He got took away. My mama said she was going to get him back, but she never did. His name is Hunter."


"Then I'm going to remember that about you," said Kristal. "Your name, and that you were kind and generous to your little brother Hunter. You helped him, and you taught him."

"Okay," Tiffani said. And then again: "Okay." Something in her voice had changed.

"Good-bye."

"Wait! What's your whole name?"

"Kristal Starlene Gibson Jaramillo."

"I'll remember that too," Tiffani said. 

Solution to the October "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Newsworthy	I. Beforehand	R. Streetcar
B. Finesse	J. Overview	S. Majorette
C. Ushers	K. Umbrella	T. Improvised
D. Leased	L. Tallies	U. Through
E. Lattice	M. Generic	V. Cheddar
F. Extremes	N. Lonely	W. Hostile
G. Rhythm	O. Addressee	X. Encyclical
H. Addlepatented	P. Doorstop	Y. Layaway
	Q. Yorkshire	Z. Lhasa apso

QUOTATION

Author—N(icholas) FULLER

Work—ABOUT GLADYS MITCHELL (Excerpted from *Sleuth's Alchemy* by Gladys Mitchell, edited by Nicholas Fuller, published by Crippen & Landru—Copyright © 2005)

"The world of Gladys Mitchell is an extraordinary place, one where the plots have 'all the mad logic of a dream,' where the detective is . . . sorceress and psychoanalyst, where the murderer is just as likely to be devoured by Nessie as more prosaically arrested . . ."

SUDDEN STOP

MITCH ALDERMAN

Elvis wagged his tail and sat up when the office phone rang. Bubba yawned and lowered the recliner. Looking at the caller ID, he let it ring. It was Arnie at State Insurance with work. Elvis barked with each new ring. After a dozen barks, Bubba picked up the phone, "At the sound of the tone, leave your message. After my nap, I'll call you back."

"It's one in the afternoon. Another sunny day in beautiful Winter Haven, Florida. Time to go to work."

"What is so important?" Bubba scratched Elvis's neck as the bluetick hound tried to climb onto the La-Z-Boy.

"You remember the wreck on Cypress Gardens Boulevard where the nurse hit the bridge support head-on? Passenger flew out the windshield into Lake Roy?"

"I remember. Killed him. Is she still in the coma?"

"Yes. We have the insurance on her. Hospitalization, her auto liability, and an umbrella policy. Unfortunately, she had Melvin Banks as her agent." The voice faded and strengthened. Bubba could picture him pacing laps in his office, talking on the speaker phone, the largely unsuccessful attempt to keep his waistline under control.

"Upper Limits Mel. Why don't you quit letting him write those policies?"

"Actuarially, he's on target. But now the deceased's family is suing."

"So pay them and let me get back to sleep."

"Pay a million three? Never. I'll messenger what we have on the accident, but you'll need to get the autopsy report. The woman's in Winter Haven Regional, costing us a fortune every day."

"Send it to my house. I'll see what I think."

"Find us a lever or a hammer. Your usual plus a grand bonus for something useful. Get moving. Call me." Arnie hung up. Not for the first time Bubba wondered why he kept working so hard to save State so much money. The fact that Arnie called him a couple of times a month and therefore paid his overhead had something

to do with it that coupled with the fact that there was not much else that the knowledge gained from twenty years of prowling through Polk County's underbelly was good for. A sergeant's retirement check was the sure sign of a misspent youth.

"Time to go to work, Elvis." Elvis barked as Bubba stood and stretched, palms against the ceiling. He felt a knot in his lower back from doing stiff-legged deadlifts at Big Al's Gym before work. After a small late breakfast—the diet was working; he was down to 308 pounds—he had taken a couple of ibuprofen, then fallen asleep in the recliner, where he'd been when Arnie called.

By the time the messenger arrived, Bubba had managed to fix a glass of iced tea, take off his boots, and sit in his rocker on the back porch. Elvis ran circles around the young man as he walked through the yard. He had delivered to Bubba before. Accepting the five dollar tip with his left hand, he scratched the dog with his right. Bubba sat back into the rocker with the big manila package and watched the messenger trot away with Elvis barking at his heels. He sipped tea and read the file. On the surface, it looked like a million three might be the total liability. Arnie hated having to pay that much money for any reason, much less a mere death from a traffic accident. A grand bonus if he saved them a million. Sounded like the usual ratio. Insurance companies.

When he finished the file, Bubba dialed the Winter Haven Police Department. After a few minutes' conversation, the desk sergeant put him through to the traffic supervisor, Roger Grimsley.

"Hey, Bubba. How's retirement?"

"Arnie out at State Insurance just ruined a good nap. He has the policy on that wreck on CGB where the passenger went through the windshield and the driver is in a coma. I'd like to see the file."

"Don't see why not. Come by about two."

He put Elvis in his pen, fixed a carry-mug of iced tea, and headed for Winter Haven Regional Hospital to see his client's client. Was any client of his client a client of his? After ten minutes of driving through tourist traffic, he reached the spreading complex. When he first started driving a patrol car, without air-conditioning, when life was simple, there had been huge oaks along the edges of the hospital's parking lot where he could park in the shade and stay cool. Now he had an excellent AC, and the parking lot had asphalted every available surface to the north of the complex. The trees, of course, were gone.

He parked in a police-only space near the emergency room entrance. It was either there or a hundred yards away in the visitors' lot. As he shut the door to the Bronco, a golf cart stopped and

a red-faced man in a security uniform climbed out carrying a clipboard. His uniform was sweat-soaked, and a slump seemed to curve his entire body. He almost looked comical except for the gleam below bushy eyebrows.

"You're big enough to be a cop," he said.

"I was a sergeant for a long time," Bubba answered.

"The Bronco sort of looks like a police vehicle."

"It was an off-road search and rescue for a long time."

"But neither of you are anything important now?"

"Neither are you, right?"

The man laughed and pulled out a bandana to wipe his forehead. "Thirty years in a uniform in Detroit. Came down here three years ago to get away from the winters. Now the heat's killing me."

"This is a lovely spring day, almost cool. Can't be over eighty-five."

"You can't park here. Real police only."

"I'm working on a case. Won't be here long."

"That's for sure. Move it now." He jerked a thumb to the north.

"All the way over to visitors'? I will be back in ten minutes. I promise."

"It's my ass, my job, if the administration finds you here. I don't want to depend on supplementing my retirement by finding change at the park with my metal detector. Back when, I had Henry Deuce towed for parking in a police space, and I don't think you own the politicians the Fords did. So move it."

"No wonder you never made it out of a prowler car. I'm Bubba Simms. Used to be with the Polk County Sheriff."

"I'm Harold Johnson. And now you're a private snooper. Still have to move it."

Bubba smiled ruefully and stuck out his hand. They shook.

"At least it is a cool spring day for your walk," Harold said as Bubba climbed back into the Bronco.

The sun was bright and the air did not feel cool as Bubba hiked back to the emergency room entrance. He waved at Gina, the triage nurse, standing at a gurney. She waved back, and he slipped through the back way to the elevators. He rode to the sixth floor and found the nurses' station. He gave the RN writing charts, his card, and found out the room number.

Room 617 looked more like a college girl's dorm than a hospital. There were framed pictures on two nightstands. A poster of a girl surfing in a pipeline curl. Three different flower arrangements accented the coverings on the tables arranged about the room. The room had clearly been designed for two beds, but there was only one now. The bed, covered with flowered sheets, was beside

the window and the afternoon sun brought the unconscious woman's features into sharp relief. She had dark curly hair that had been brushed recently and pinned back on one side. She wore a pale rose gown that complemented her olive skin. A monitor with a slow heartbeat wave, a breathing tube taped to her nose, and an IV drip completed the picture.

"Who are you?" A woman's voice sounded behind Bubba. He had heard her nurse's shoes approaching. He answered without turning.

"Bubba Simms. I'm working for State Insurance, investigating what happened. Not very big, is she?"

"Big enough to be a pediatric RN. Four foot eleven and a half."

Bubba turned around and a tall nurse dressed in blue scrubs stood there looking past him at the bed. Lean, with broad shoulders, long legs, and red hair pulled back in a ponytail, she was too severe to be considered pretty, but her green eyes glistened in the sunlight.

"Is there any hope?" Bubba asked.

"Always hope. Not much chance. Her brain swelled too much. I'm Clarice. I work down in pediatrics too. The desk called and said someone was up here visiting."

"Who did the room?"

"Friends. She has no family anymore, parents dead."

"Are you a friend?"

"We worked together. We were friends."

"Do you know if she and Seworth were dating?"

"They weren't."

"You sound positive."

"Because I am. She couldn't stand him."

"Then how well did she know him?"

"If you were female at this hospital, you knew him. If you had any sense, you avoided him. She had a great deal of sense."

"Was she giving him a ride home?"

"Never." Clarice walked over and adjusted the alignment of the top sheet by a quarter of an inch. "No woman with any sense ever found herself alone with him. Though there were enough who found him attractive—at least to hear him tell it. Hard to have lunch in the cafeteria without hearing one of his tales told to fools. His buddies from the lab."

"Maybe she had a moment of attraction?"

"No." She turned and faced Bubba. He looked down at her from his six-foot-five height. She probably wasn't used to many people looking down at her.

"How do you know? People have secrets."

"I know. Besides, what difference does it make?"

"She was driving. She was responsible for what happened. That's what the lawsuit says. To the tune of seven figures."

"So you're just trying to save State money. No one cares what really happened."

"No reason I can't care about both. I'm a multitasker."

A flick of smile changed Clarice's face. "Why should I believe you care at all?"

"You know Gina in E.R.? Ask her."

Clarice looked at him for a long moment and then went to the phone and punched a number. Bubba stood by the window until the low murmur of conversation ended. He turned and raised an eyebrow.

"Gina vouches for you with her cat's life. That's about as sure a thing as I'll find around here. Patsy and I had plans to drive to Tampa, to Ybor City, to go to a private club the night of the accident."

"Maybe she changed her mind?"

"The last person in the world she'd change for would be that strutting, aggressive little rooster, Bill Seworth. He gave her the willies."

"He'd been hitting on her for months. She finally told him not if they were the last couple on earth. She'd rather have roaches rule the world than continue his DNA. He didn't take it well. Seemed offended. But that's what happens when you pat a person's ass in the cafeteria."

"So you're sure she didn't have anything going on with Seworth?"

"I was sure enough that night that I started calling police when she was an hour late to my place. I got here when she was still in the E.R., I know." She pushed a strand of hair away from Patsy's forehead. "I have to get back. Anything else I can tell you?"

"Do you have a key to her apartment? I'd like to look around. See if there's . . ."

"No use. Everything is in storage. She only had a small place, kept some of her clothes there and such. I brought her pictures up here. I found no secrets. She was the Patsy I knew."

"Anything else you think is important?"

"She's going to die like this. If you find out the truth, please don't bury it just to help some insurance company."

"I won't."

Clarice stuck out her hand and they shook. She followed Bubba out of the room and shut the door behind them, blocking the blip of the monitor. They took different elevators away from the sixth floor.

Bubba left the hospital through the E.R. He wanted to thank Gina for her help, but she was listening to a mother explain about her child's broken arm and could only nod to Bubba as he passed by. He hated hospitals.

"Want a ride?" Bubba turned and saw Harold coasting up.

"Hello, Detroit."

"Hop in. We'll see if this thing has enough horsepower to get both of us to your Bronco."

"Why the service?"

"I asked around. People said you weren't a redneck peckerwood and to be nice."

"So I can park in the police area next time?"

"Not if I'm on duty, but I will give you a ride in my official security-mobile because you don't look like jogging is your strong suit."

"You either. This cart's struggling."

"You working on the Seworth death, aren't you?"

"Good hospital grapevine. You know anything useful?"

"Tons, but nothing about that little prick. Tried to tell me where he could park. She was sweet. Always a smile. I had to let his folks through the gate to retrieve his truck after he died."

"It was in the employees' area?"

"Next to where Patsy usually parked. We try to keep an eye on the women in the parking lots. Going to and getting out of cars leaves them vulnerable. Usually never have any trouble. Because we have a good plan and we watch. At least on my shift."

"Anything else you can think of?"

"Nope. I'm not paid to think anymore. Just keep 'em moving so no one complains to a suit. After I move my daily quota, I go home and look for buried treasure with my metal detector. Another Florida lie. Here you are."

Bubba stood and the cart lifted. He held out his hand. "Thanks for the ride."

"Anytime. How did Patsy look?"

"Peaceful."

"Too bad. She's lasted too long already." He spun the wheel and left in a poor imitation of a wheely. Bubba smiled and cranked up the Bronco. There was work to be done for his client's client.

He called the parents of the passenger and made an appointment with a quiet woman to meet with her and her husband at four when he got home from work.

Bubba stopped by the ATM, then on to the WHPD downtown office. There he slipped in the back door. They hadn't changed the lock in the years since Bubba retired from the Polk County

Sheriff's Department. During his career, he had accumulated keys to almost every entrance door in the city departments. They came in handy. Roger was behind his desk with a tall stack of manila folders on one side of his desk and a smaller one on the other.

"Looks like you are about done for the day," Bubba said.

"When there is only one stack, I can leave," Roger said. He pushed back from the desk and stood to shake Bubba's hand. Bubba stood a head taller, but Roger weighed a wide two hundred fifty pounds. His bald head had a white circle where his Florida Gator hat always perched when he went outside. They both sat, and Roger pulled a manila folder from the side drawer. He tapped its side on the desk.

"That it?" Bubba asked.

"A bad one, like I said. Take a look yourself."

Bubba flipped through the file, noting the important parts of the familiar forms. Apparently, Patsy Jenks had lost control of her Toyota in the construction zone on Cypress Gardens Boulevard and hit a concrete embankment head-on. Her passenger, William Seworth, had gone through the windshield and landed in a drainage ditch that fed Lake Roy. He had not been wearing a seat belt. She had and remained in the car. The air bag had inflated, but her head had shattered the side window. The passenger was dead when the EMTs arrived and Patsy had been taken to WH Regional unconscious.

He drove out to Cypress Gardens Boulevard, past the Publix shopping center, onto the winding curves between the small lakes. It was an easy drive but congested with tourists who apparently had never encountered a construction area on their migration to Florida. The curve leading to the concrete embankment was mild, not even needing a camber. The concrete stood a dozen feet off the road with the ditch running beside it. At forty miles an hour, sixty feet a second, the Toyota would have been on it in a blink. Unless the passenger had been watching the road, he'd never seen it coming. Unsnapped bra, probably not looking at the road. Bubba pulled over and stopped, ignoring the honk of an RV horn.

The gash on the concrete was embedded with blue paint. There were glass particles and plastic fragments piled against the column. Someone had swept. Bubba squatted down and felt the knot in his back tighten. He looked and found nothing of interest. Then he walked over to the ditch and looked down at the drying mud. There hadn't been much rain in the last month. But it was still too soft to walk on; a person could probably drown in the mud if they were paralyzed. Was drowning the right word for mud? More probably suffocate, or terminally muddled. Bad death either way.

Bubba headed back to the Bronco. He hadn't expected to see much after two months, and he wasn't disappointed. Since there weren't any clues at the crime scene, it was time to learn about the people. People always left clues.

Bubba drove slowly, dreading any conversation with parents about their dead son; he'd done too many of those while in uniform. He found their concrete-block house with the big yard at the end of a long driveway off Eagle Lake Loop Road. The house was freshly painted. The yard mowed, trimmed, and edged. The truck in front of the garage shined. Two hounds of indeterminate breed crawled out from under the truck when Bubba stopped but crawled back when he straightened up and stared at them. He had not reached the porch when the front door opened. A compact man with a severe crew cut walked out onto the porch and stopped with his thumbs in the belt of his ironed jeans. A huge silver buckle gleamed between his hands. He looked freshly showered; his chest stretched the white T-shirt, even if it was probably a size small.

"I don't have to talk to you, Bubba Simms," he said.

Bubba recognized him. He had not placed the name until now. He didn't think he'd ever known the last name.

"No, you don't, Captain Bill." Captain Bill had been running work crews for the county road department ever since Bubba could remember. The *Captain* had started back when there were prisoners on all the work crews. Not that the man on the porch had ever been a policeman, but he wore a uniform and demanded the authority. Captain had sounded good. Bubba glanced and saw that Seworth was wearing his usual pair of high-heeled cowboy boots, which left him about a foot shorter than Bubba.

"The fool wife said you could come by. I'd have told you to buzz off."

"That certainly is your right, Captain. But the thing is, the people at State Insurance pay me to look. I tell them this, I tell them that, then they tend to do what needs to be done. Otherwise, they have to be an insurance company, and you cannot imagine how long an insurance company lawyer can wait. So it's your choice."

The man hesitated. Bubba knew Captain Bill wanted to tell him to get off his land, but he resisted the urge on the off chance that Bubba just might have some influence with the insurance company.

"Might as well get it over with. Come on in." He turned and went into the house. Bubba started up the steps to the porch. A woman opened the door and smiled a quick welcome as he went past her into the house. The living room was bigger than it looked

from the outside. There were two recliners set to face the TV, a sofa off to one side with a coffee table in front of it. Framed pictures sat on all the flat surfaces. There were a few group shots, but most of them were father and son, fishing, hunting, with baseballs, basketballs, and one with a car engine torn apart. Lots of jeans and white T-shirts.

"Can I bring us some tea? I just made iced tea. Captain likes to have his fresh tea waiting when he gets home from work," the woman said. She looked back and forth from Bubba to her husband. Standing beside him, her black hair was streaked with gray and twisted in a bun, she made Captain Bill look almost tall.

"He's not staying long enough for anything," Captain said, waving his hand to dismiss her. She went to an armchair in the corner and picked up a knitting project. Bubba sat on the couch while Seworth kicked back in his recliner. With his feet up and his hands behind his head, he watched Bubba out of the corner of his eye. "Ask your damn fool questions, Simms."

"I am sorry for the loss of your son. Do you know if he was dating Patsy Jenks?"

"No," said the father.

"Oh no, definitely not. He's engaged to a lovely girl, Brenda Styles," Mrs. Seworth said. "He lived here to save money for their wedding."

"Be quiet!" the father said.

"Any idea why he was in her car?"

"No."

"She must have invited him. Billy was a polite boy. He'd never go anywhere he wasn't invited."

"Be quiet!" Captain turned his head and faced Bubba. "Junior was his own man. I raised him to be. Who knows what he and some chickie were up to. It's not like he was married or anything. He did what he wanted to do, what needed to be done. The stupid bitch killed him and now she's gonna pay."

"Patsy's in a coma," Bubba said.

"Serves her right. Let her suffer."

"Oh Captain, no one should suffer like that," his wife said, eyes down, fingers flying. "Billy was a wonderful son and I cry all the time, but it was an accident, and her being in a coma won't bring my Billy back." She dropped her hands to her lap, and Bubba could see tears dropping on the knitting.

Seworth lowered the recliner and stood. "That's enough. Get out, Simms."

Bubba stood and started to say something to Mrs. Seworth but turned instead and left. Seworth followed him. When Bubba

opened the Bronco's door, he turned. Seworth stood too close, at the edge of the door. Anger surged off him. His face was red, his breath came in snorts. He leaned toward Bubba, "You ever come around my place again, I'll gut you."

With a smooth practiced motion, Seworth pulled a knife from the case on his belt. The blade locked in place when his wrist flicked. It gleamed in the sunlight. Bubba felt a spurt of fear twist his stomach, then the flow of anger kicked in. The muscles tightened across his shoulders. His chest filled. Instincts said to kick Seworth in the closest knee and then stomp him into a mud hole when he fell.

Bubba didn't take well to having a knife pulled on him.

As he shifted his weight to his back leg to free the right foot, he looked into Seworth's eyes. The pupils were dilated, unfocused. Bubba thought he could see anger, fear, pain, hesitation; a parade of emotions. His son's death must be tearing him apart. Or Seworth was just loony.

Either way, this was neither the time nor the place for a fight. He let out the deep breath he'd been holding and climbed into the Bronco. He shut the door and started the engine, put the truck in reverse. When he reached the end of the drive, Seworth was still standing there, knife at his side, as if he didn't know what to do next.

The little bastard pulled a knife on me; he can kiss the chance of a quick settlement good-bye. Pull a knife on me. See if you get a cent. Bubba turned the vehicle for home. There was something to be said for a quiet evening throwing the ball for Elvis.

Brenda Styles was a waitress at the Waffle House out on Highway 27 at the I-4 interchange. He had talked to her on the phone after Elvis collapsed from fun. She'd said in the morning around eleven was a good time to talk, between rushes. She told him she was the blonde whose name tag said BREN. He told her he'd be the triple waffle, ham on the side, wearing the Georgia Bulldog hat. She said that that didn't narrow it down much at Waffle Houses. He said he'd find her.

He saw her talking to the grillman when he entered. Bright blond hair in a french twist, dark eyebrows, and olive skin. BREN on the name tag when she turned and smiled. She pointed to an empty booth and pantomimed coffee. He nodded and eased himself into the booth.

"Triple waffle and homefries with cheese is more like it," she said as she set their cups on the table and perched on the other seat like a happy parakeet.

"I'm dieting."

"Ha. Like I am. Eat everything that can't escape and hunt some down at night." She opened two sugars and two creams and stirred them in.

"And you weigh, what, with all your fatness?"

"Been five foot, ninety pounds since I was thirteen. I've got cut-offs I've been wearing for twenty years. Missed the growth spurt. You want a waffle? We make the best."

"No, but thanks. Just some information about Bill Seworth." Her eyes dulled for a moment, then she smiled ruefully.

"Billy was sweet. At times. Difficult at others."

"How so?"

"He couldn't decide if he was tomcat or a husband-in-waiting. He'd bug me to marry him at the damndest times, and I kept telling him to grow up. For God's sake, he was thirty and living at home."

"Did you see him often?"

"Whenever he wanted to party. I must say he did show a girl a good time, all night long. Then I wouldn't see him for a week or more. I feel bad about that last day. We were supposed to party, but I had to fill in for the manager. Talked to him at noon and a couple of hours later he's dead. Life's a bitch and then you die."

Bubba nodded and finished his cup of coffee. Bren automatically left the booth and brought the pot to refill their cups. She moved deftly on her thick-soled shoes.

"Sure you don't want a waffle?"

"Sure. Did Billy ever show signs of violence?"

She stopped with the pot in her hand. Then she returned the coffee to the brewing unit and sat back in the booth.

"Things are going to jump in a few minutes, so we have to finish this up. No, not violence. But he could make a show of being a badass. I had to talk us out of a few places before he got hurt, knife or no knife. There are people who aren't afraid of a knife. Those are the violent ones. No, Billy wasn't violent, just an angry boy at times. Anything else?"

"Did you like him?"

"There were moments. Let me get you a go-cup for that coffee." She returned with a Styrofoam cup and lid. Bubba reached for his wallet.

"No charge." She looked him in the eye; they were level while he sat. "Drop by sometime when you aren't working. Maybe we'll have a moment."

"There are moments, and then there are moments."

"Isn't that a fact." She patted him on the shoulder and went back behind the counter, smiled at him as he left.

Bubba drove home with mixed feelings. He liked the visit with Bren but was beginning not to like this case. The car wreck of unrequited lovers was devolving, so he decided to ask the Queen of Devolution: Detective Robin Johnson, Supervisor of Crimes Against Women at the Polk County Sheriff's Office.

First, he had to let Elvis out of his pen, hug him, hold him in his arms after a leap against his chest, and then watch him run circles finding the scent of trespassers in the back yard. Bubba propped open the porch's door, grabbed the portable phone, and sat in the rocker where he could throw tennis balls. He threw a tennis ball, watched Elvis tear after it, then dialed Robin's direct line.

"Johnson," she said.

"Hey, pumpkin. How's tricks?"

"Simms, I'm hanging up."

"No, wait, I have a hypothetical for you." He threw the ball down the slope to the lake's edge.

"I don't need hypothetical. I already have three real rapes, two spousal abuses with fractures, and numerous raincoat flappers that need to be in jail. Good-bye."

"Would an intelligent, attractive, professional woman—outside of the movies—voluntarily give a ride to a man who had groped her in the workplace cafeteria, causing her to tell the entire employee base that she'd rather see the human race die out than allow his DNA to survive? A ride the next day where they were being road buddies?" The ball returned wet.

"Why are you wasting my time?" She hung up.

"That's what I thought too," Bubba said to the dial tone. He threw the soggy ball and went inside to change. He closed the porch door so the ball would stay outside. He emerged in a few minutes dressed in old jeans, T-shirt, and work boots. He found a shovel in the garage, put it in the Bronco, and allowed Elvis the shotgun seat so he could howl at traffic. Not quite a siren, but he wasn't bad.

They arrived at the concrete buttress at the end of the construction zone. He parked as close to the ditch as he could so Elvis wouldn't be tempted to disobey and help him look. The pictures from the traffic report showed that the final landing spot for Seworth was about twenty feet past the impact site. The water level was lower in the ditch than it had been and the cat-tails along the edge were leaning over.

Bubba walked carefully out into the ditch. The mud gave way and gave way some more. While the water wasn't more than a few

inches deep, it quickly filled his boots as he sank in the mud. He poked with the shovel along the pathway he imagined that Seworth had flown. There had to be a knife here. That was the only explanation that made sense.

The shovel blade struck a solid object. Reaching slowly through the mud and muck, he found a concrete chunk. Then he found a piece of rebar. An unbroken beer bottle. A tire for a boat trailer. Another chunk of concrete. Something that might have been a toaster oven. But no knife.

After an hour, Bubba left the ditch and returned to the Bronco. Mud was drying on his shirt sleeves. His jeans were wet past the knees and his boots sloshed as he walked. Elvis had given up asking to help and was curled asleep on the front seat. Bubba opened the rear hatch of the Bronco, tossed in the shovel, and found a clean rag to wipe off his arms. Elvis yawned and looked expectantly, awaiting a new plan.

"Maybe there is no knife out here. Maybe it was still with him, and the inventory was wrong. Let's go find out." Elvis barked approval. Any plan was better than sleeping in a car seat.

When Bubba reached the hospital parking lot, he realized there was no place to park that wouldn't leave Elvis in the sun. And bluetick hounds were not allowed in the emergency room. Harold was nowhere in sight, so he parked in a police-only space, rolled the windows down just a touch, and left the motor running with the AC on. Elvis would survive for a little while. He grabbed his briefcase and headed into the emergency room where the clothing inventory had been done.

Gina emerged from her cubicle and met him only a few steps into the E.R. She was trying not to laugh.

"What are you supposed to be? A mud rep?" Laughter spread across the E.R. There were only a few active patients waiting service, and all the nurses and clerks had time to appreciate her humor.

Bubba sat the briefcase on a counter, opened it, found the file, and pulled out the inventory sheet. "I'm looking for J. Dawkins or Hawkins or Gawkins."

"Josh Dawkins. He's not here today. What do you need him for?"

"I'm looking into the Seworth death . . ."

"I know."

"... and there is something not on the inventory. I was wondering if he might have left it off by accident."

"Did you notice that he listed the pocket change by the denominations? Josh never leaves anything out. Josh is The Littlest Detail. That's why he does all those kinds of things for us."

"Would he have taken something if it caught his eye?"

"Bright shiny objects? If it was a computer or a set of drums he might have taken it, but nothing else would have caught his eye. If it is not listed, it wasn't there."

"That's what I needed to know. Thanks, Gina." He put out his hand and Gina took it.

"Thank you. We don't often have visitations from Pigpen. Come back anytime."

As soon as Bubba left the E.R., he saw the golf cart parked next to the Bronco. Harold was sitting there with his feet propped on the dash, hands linked behind his head, listening to Elvis howl at him.

"I suppose that now you are going to tell me that this is a police dog."

"Search and rescue hound," Bubba said as he unlocked the Bronco and let Elvis out to meet Harold. He sniffed him and then ran around the golf cart, then the Bronco. Eventually, he decided to sit on the other seat of the security cart. Harold patted his head and scratched behind the floppy ears.

"What does he rescue?"

"Mostly tennis balls, but he has higher hopes."

"That's about what I figured. So, now tell me why you're dressed as Sergeant Preston of the Royal Southeastern Swamp Patrol."

"I spent a long hour in a ditch because Elvis can't smell through mud." Then he told him about the afternoon's activities. Harold laughed and put his feet down.

"My shift ends in half an hour. Meet me at the ditch at five. I always thought you rednecks couldn't find your butt with both hands, and now I'll prove it." Harold told Elvis to get off the cart, then sped away toward the far side of the parking lot where a horn was blowing.

Bubba took Elvis home and then changed clothes. He was standing beside the concrete column when Harold arrived. Harold climbed out of a black Crown Victoria with rust showing on both back quarter panels. He wore brown plaid Bermuda shorts, lace-up sneakers, and a pullover knit shirt. His knees were larger than his thighs. A dark tan almost covered the varicose veins on his calves.

"Someone needs to feed you," Bubba said.

"I have a liver like a rock. Started AA two years ago after spitting up blood. Not much for food or drink anymore. Just stay busy." He opened the back door and brought out an elaborate metal detector—a long tube with electronics on both ends and a sling that went over his shoulder.

"That thing going to reach down into the mud far enough to do any good?"

"We'll see. I found a silver dollar almost two feet under one time. Show me the path Seworth flew."

They walked past the concrete through the grassy space and then approached the ditch itself. Harold fiddled with the controls as he walked. He looked at the pile of debris that Bubba had dug out of the ditch. He shook his head.

"The concrete won't be a problem, but any other rebar will show up." He stepped off into the decaying plant matter at the edge of the ditch. He swept a path about a dozen feet wide for each step forward. A few feet into the ditch, he called out, "Bring me that rake out of my car."

Bubba walked over to the car and pulled a short-handled garden rake with three curved prongs on it from the back seat. A beach towel covered the leather upholstery. He brought the rake to Harold, who shifted the metal detector to his left hand and dug the rake around with his right. He brought out a piece of rebar and tossed it on the back, then handed the rake to Bubba to hold. He continued his methodical search. Bubba watched and flicked mosquitoes away. After three more pieces of rebar, five beer cans, a hubcap, and something too rusted to be identified, Harold said, "Now this looks interesting. Take the detector." He exchanged the rake with Bubba and began to carefully dig with the rake, then he bent over and used his hands in the mud. Water reached his shoulders and he had to lift his head to breathe. He stood and held a knife between his thumb and forefinger. He began to walk out.

"A Yankee with a metal detector—crime's worst nightmare." He laughed and dropped the knife into a gallon-size baggy that Bubba held. Bubba looked at the open knife through the plastic.

"That what you need?"

"It's a Case, single blade, lock knife. That's what I guessed it would be. An unlikely coincidence, I'd say."

"Never believed much in coincidence myself. What are you going to do with that knife?"

"Settle this claim against Patsy's insurance."

"She was a nice little woman. Be a shame if anything happened to create any more speculation about her and what happened."

"I can be subtle when I have to be."

"Subtle as an elephant in a living room."

"Depends on the size of the living room."

"I guess it does. Anything else?"

"No. I appreciate this."

"Did it for her. Never did think she was dating Seworth."

They shook and Bubba waited for Harold to wipe his arms and legs with a clean towel and then place another on his seat before he drove away. Bubba went home to eat supper and think about what to do about the little rapist bastard while Elvis partied in the yard. After all, it was Friday night.

Even though it was eight thirty on a Saturday morning, Bubba figured Arnie would be at work. When he answered the phone, he sounded winded, like he'd been pacing the office since dawn.

"What have you got for me, Bubba?"

"Not completely sure yet. But what would be the settle number for you?"

"One dollar and not a penny more."

"I'm hanging up now. Elvis and I are going to hunt snipes. Do something useful instead of listening to you."

"Wait. Fifty, hundred K at most. If it happens soon. People are nervous over this. What have you found out?"

"That there are moments, and then there are moments."

"Now I'm hanging up. Call me."

Even though the pickup was gone from the Seworth's driveway, Bubba stopped and got out. He could talk to the missus without the Captain glaring. But there was a note taped on the front door inside the porch.

Tom and Sister,

We've gone to the Cedars. The headstone has arrived. Tried to call you but you had already left. We'll wait there.

Harriet

Bubba decided to drive to the cemetery and talk to them about dropping their suit. Seworth might be less volatile away from home when he heard what Bubba had to say. And how much money it was going to cost him.

There was another couple with the Seworths standing in front of a tall headstone of red granite when Bubba arrived. He parked a few car links away and stood outside the Bronco watching Captain Bill disengage himself from the others and walk over. He stopped a few steps away from Bubba and spoke in a low voice, "I apologize about the other day. I had no business threatening you. Lot of anger in me that day. I made a mistake." He held out his hand.

Bubba looked at the red eyes and the splotched face, then reached out and shook the hand. "I am sorry for your loss," he said. "The stone looks good."

"She likes it. She should; it cost us five thousand dollars. But

now she'll have something to visit and bring flowers to. Memories of Junior are about all she has. Why are you here?"

"Wanted to show you something."

Seworth stepped around the open Bronco door to see what Bubba had. His hand shook slightly as he reached toward the plastic baggy. The mud had dried and flecked off the handle of the knife. The blade looked dull in the sunlight. Green algae filled the recess. His hand stopped before he touched the knife.

"Where did you find this?"

"In the ditch where he died. The blade was already open."

Seworth nodded to himself and withdrew his hand. "She can't see this."

"No need for her to."

"You giving this to the insurance people?"

"Not unless I have to."

"You won't. I'll call my lawyer Monday. Tell him to drop the suit." Seworth's voice grew softer with each word.

"Just tell him to settle for something reasonable. Less talk that way. Fewer questions to answer."

Seworth nodded and stepped away. "I best get back to her now. I'm obliged to you."

"I'll get the knife to you after this settles down."

"Fair enough." He walked off slowly, shoulders sagging.

Bubba drove away while Seworth still hugged his wife. The Bronco found the road toward the hospital. He thought he ought to tell Patsy that the truth was known, even if she couldn't hear him. And maybe she could. Who knew what went on in comas? Perhaps Elvis was right, you don't have to be awake to chase rabbits. ♀

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

From "Body English," AHMM, October 2004

—John H. Dirckx

The first time I ever saw him was when he flopped feet first out of that closet, dead as a mackerel.

IN A CIVILIZED MANNER

REX BURNS

A flock of crows, circling and quarreling over food, had drawn an Aboriginal boy to a dry gorge in the Oombulgurri Reserve. When he saw what that food was, the hair lifted along the back of his neck, and he ran blindly toward his family camp to escape the spirit of evil.

By the time the Aboriginal warden reached the scene and made it back to where his mobile phone worked, another day had passed. During that time, half a dozen Aborigines, alerted by a more efficient bush telegraph, had come out of the scrub and rock to look. Then the medical team called in from Wyndham to remove what was left of Roland Mitchell mucked up the site even more. In short, Sergeant Eddie Hall told Aboriginal Liaison Constable Leonard Smith, there was bugger-all of a crime scene left.

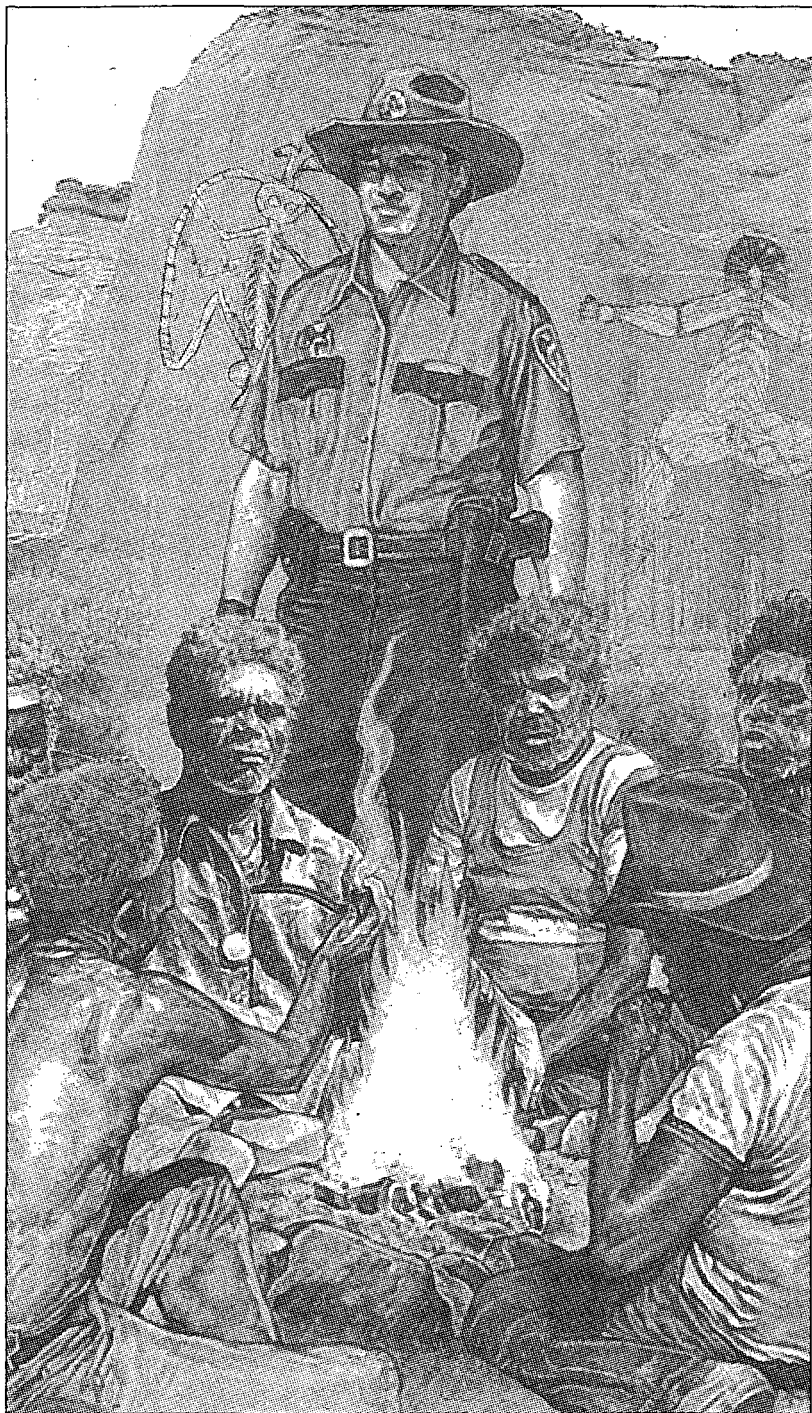
"Which is fine with me," the sergeant said. "Have no detective free to work a murder scene anyway. What I want you to do is fly to Wyndham, go out to Oombulgurri, and liaise with the Aborigines. Learn of any brawling, trouble over a woman, pay-back—whatever stirs up a suspect."

Leonard asked, "Did the warden come up with anything?"

"Wouldn't waste my time there. Warden Bates is a cousin of the victim. Hell, they're all cousins—you know how these bush settlements are: Everybody's related." The voice on the telephone paused with sudden caution, then came back in a more measured tone. "As you know, our Aboriginal police wardens do not have statutory powers, so investigating a homicide is beyond Bates's charge."

Aboriginal lawmen in the bush were often ill trained, poorly supported, and equipped with only a baton, a pair of handcuffs, and a spear. The sergeant probably had his doubts about ALC Smith too.

Sergeant Hall cleared his throat and went on. "I'm billeted for



ten constables, but the effing budget's good for only eight. All busy as bloody one-armed paperhangers. Tourist season. Every year we get more who don't know arse from elbow about survival in the bush. I need bodies, and Superintendent Roberts said he'd cut orders to attach you to my station. You'll hear from him directly, Constable."

Which settled any doubt of Leonard's participation. He tried to stifle the excitement in his voice at this, his first homicide assignment. "How was the victim killed, Sergeant?"

"Gunshot."

"Shot?" That was unexpected. "Not stabbed or beaten?"

"Gunshot to the back of the head. Pieces of the slug dug out by the medico—.22 caliber, I'd say, but sent it to Perth for analysis. Haven't responded yet. Medico says there were other wounds too. Six stab wounds to the left thigh. Almost healed and still bandaged. Means they came before death, of course. No other visible traumas."

Death by shooting was a puzzle, and Leonard had turned it over during the afternoon flight from Derby. A knife, a head banging, that would point to an Aboriginal killer. Thigh wounds could mean a ritual punishment for Mitchell having violated some tribal law. That business—not officially sanctioned—still happened, especially on remote reserves like Oombulgurri.

But in a nation where guns were both expensive and registered, a shooting fit a city murder—Sydney, Melbourne—where, Leonard had read, the .22 caliber was often favored because that slug splintered too much to be matched to a weapon. Why would an Aboriginal on a reserve as isolated as the Oombulgurri be killed by a city crim?

That question and others accompanied Leonard as he heaved at the steering wheel of the ancient Land Rover Sergeant Hall had assigned him. In some distant past, the worn vehicle had been handed down from the Regional Force Surveillance Unit. Their green and orange double diamond was slowly reappearing through a swipe of sun-worn paint on the door and, with the rattles, groans, and lurches, told Leonard of the hard use the vehicle had suffered.

It was near midday when finally he splashed across the rivulets and sandbars of the Forrest River. Grinding up a low bank to the grassy flats, he passed a WELCOME TO OOMBULGURRI sign that marked the landing when the river was navigable during the Wet. On a low hill above the dusty town, a cross commemorated the Aboriginal victims of a massacre by state police. The facts of that 1926 assault had been garbled by history, but the sense of injury

lingered. No longer an Anglican mission, the town had been reclaimed as an Aboriginal settlement partly because of that massacre. Now, it was the metropolis of the reserve and even offered occasional corroboree dances for tourists.

A dirt road, once an old footpath, meandered from the landing and turned into a grid of sandy lanes lined by small, square homes. The warden's office was in the community house. Leonard rapped on its doorframe. A man with a trimmed beard peppered gray looked up from a desk that held neat piles of papers and memos.

"G'day."

"Warden Bates? I'm Constable Smith—assigned to look into that shooting death. Might we chat a bit?" Sergeant Hall might not trust the warden, but it was politic to let the man know an outsider was nosing about his reserve.

"Ah—"The hum of a community generator and the distant, faint screams from children at recess in a school yard emphasized the silence. "Sergeant Hall sent you here?"

"He told me you identified the body." It wasn't a complete answer, but it wasn't a complete lie either.

Bates nodded. "You're in that new Aboriginal Liaison program, eh?"

"Provisionary, anyway. Hope to be made permanent."

"Become a mainstream officer, eh? A proper constable."

"That's the hope."

"Right. Well, about time, I say. Care for a cuppa?"

"Always." Leonard sat on the old wooden chair in front of the desk while the warden busied himself with the teapot and lit a gas burner. Behind him, a wall map was spotted with crisply penciled notations. Beside the window, a framed photograph of half a dozen bare-legged young Aboriginals in military shirts stood stiffly in a row. A yellowed label in coppery ink read, "NorForce Nackaroos, 1944." In a corner between the map and the photo leaned a tall spear, its thick leaf-shaped blade of glass wicked and its thin shaft polished by much handling. "Wondered what you could tell me about the victim, his mob. Anything I might follow up on." He added, "I understand he was one of your mob. A cousin?"

"Yeah. Through his father's mother's sister's daughter who married my father's brother. I identified him—Roland Mitchell—but don't know that much about him. Sugar and Sunshine?" He held up a box of powdered milk.

Leonard was somewhat surprised to hear the warden use the dead man's name. Some believed such usage would call up the evil the man had done while alive. Others said it would bring back

a ghost angry at being killed. Either Bates did not care about those dangers or was showing that he was more modern than traditional.

"Sugar, please. Any guesses who would kill him or why?"

The warden frowned and shook his head. "Haven't heard of any recent dustups—not with him involved, anyway. Usual larrikin stuff when he was a kid. Drunk, vandalism, whatever. Spent some time in juvie, I remember. But that was years ago."

From what Leonard knew, juvenile detention was seen by many outback youths more as a vacation than a punishment: three meals a day, flush toilets, a basketball court, telly in the evening. "Did he ever live in Sydney? Melbourne?"

Bates sipped at his steaming mug. "Might've. Got money from somewhere. A year or so past, he set his mother up with a little fishing shop. Might want to talk with her—over in Five Rivers."

Leonard made a note of the woman's name and address. "What about his father—your uncle—where's he?"

"Dead. Drank himself to death."

That could be carved on a lot of tombstones, including those of Leonard's white father and Aboriginal mother. "Mitchell had spear marks on his leg, recent ones. Know anything about that?"

"No. Was wearing trousers when I found him." Bates gazed a long moment out the window, weariness settling under his eyes. "Lived here all my life. Son to father, going back to bloody Dreamtime. That's my granda' there." He nodded toward the photograph on the wall. "But I'm a copper and the grandson of a copper, so I'm not told everything that happens on the reserve."

Leonard understood. "Any guess why he'd be speared?"

"Most likely tribal law. His mob comes from Lizard Hollow, near where he was found. His mother's sister's at Neildu. You'll want to talk to them—if they'll talk to you."

Five Rivers was near Wyndham, Leonard knew. But he'd never heard of Neildu or Lizard Hollow. "Can you tell me how to get there?"

"They're beyond the black stump, that's certain." The warden's chair scraped on the scarred floor as he turned to the wall map. "Goolime Road to Gibb River Road—eighty k's. Then up to Home Valley." His finger traced the route. "Access track here—in the Dry, anyway—to Nulla Nulla and Neildu. Maybe a hundred kilometers." His fingernail moved to a string of neatly penciled numbers. "Lizard Hollow GPS—best write it down: 15° 18' 6" S, 127° 38' 59" E." The finger moved an inch or so again. "Mitchell was found here." Another GPS had been penciled in and Leonard copied that as well.



Though Sergeant Hall had dismissed the crime scene, it was the end of a thread of life and the place to begin tracing that thread back through time. Leonard rattled down an overgrown track that wound toward the coordinates of Mitchell's body. Occasionally, he stopped between outcroppings of pale rock and prickly clumps of spinifex to locate himself with his GPS. When the track disappeared completely, he looked ahead through shimmering heat waves to where it was likely to go and worked his way around tangles of wattle trees and termite mounds to find stretches of sand-drifted wheel ruts. The Rover's noise and smell frightened the animals and birds, so the hot land, leached of color by the afternoon sun, seemed empty of life as well. But occasional squiggles of lizard tails in the sand, stitches of dimples from tiny feet, scrapes from larger claws told that life persisted. Finally, the vehicle groaned down a notch in the sandy wall of a gully and creaked to a halt. Here, boots and bare feet had churned the earth. Leonard turned off the engine and listened to it tick as it cooled, listened to the buzz of flies, the distant high-pitched shrieks of cockatoos.

A stretch of pebbly sand in the gully's center writhed with a scatter of ants running in quick, weaving patterns. That must have been where the body lay, and the insects still sniffed the fading odor. He waved absently at flies hanging under the wide brim of his hat and gazed around the dry creek bed and the flat, bushy country beyond. Carved by some long past flood, its chest-high banks showed roots poking out here and there. A wisp of falling sand from the lip revealed a lizard's quick movement. Except for the wind-drifted footprints, nothing made this spot different from any other bend of the gully through this empty country. So what had drawn Mitchell to it? Did he meet his killer here? Was he killed elsewhere? If so, why carry a heavy body here? Sergeant Hall hadn't said the body was moved. But if kites and dingoes had tugged at it, then the lividity would have been disturbed. Secondary lividity—that's what it was called: Blood settled in different low spots as evidence that a body had been moved after death.

He dredged up phrases from his basic course on crime scenes, which, when it came to homicide, had been a list of forensic terms and of what not to disturb rather than an explanation of investigative techniques. Detectives, it was made clear, would analyze the scene of a major crime. The constable's job was first to secure the scene from disturbance; his second was not to disturb it any further. But the book didn't always fit the field, and if the crime scene was already written off, Leonard was free to wander through it.

He went slowly down the streambed toward the distant noise of

the cockatoos, searching the grit and pebbles as he walked. Cockatoos, especially the Red Tail Black, seldom strayed far from water. Why wouldn't Mitchell meet whoever near the pleasing smell and sight of water? Because in this flat, dry land, water was a public place. Every living thing, human and otherwise, was drawn to water. If you were up to something you didn't want anyone to know about, you wouldn't do it near water.

After a few hundred meters, only vague indentations hinted at footprints, and even they disappeared. The sand constantly moved in the wind, sometimes one grain at a time, sometimes a level sheet of blurry drift. Someone may have walked this way. What was more certain was that no tires had dug grooves since the last Wet.

Another bend revealed treetops breaking the flat horizon beyond the gully walls. A ten-minute walk led Leonard, heralded by the cockatoos' alarm, into a small grove of mulga trees. Ringed by shrub and ferns, a pool nestled against a bank of pitted gray limestone. Leonard studied the spring's rim. There were no marks of freshwater crocodiles baked into the sand, but small animals and birds had left their prints. So had a single walker: one line of boot prints going up the sand, a slightly clearer line coming back. Leonard circled the pool and studied the tracks from different angles. The boots were cleated, sand ridges still sharp in some indentations. The soles—Vibram, probably—were unworn by use. The stride was a man's. He was heavier coming back than going in. Had not bothered to hide his tracks—unskilled in the bush, perhaps. Or just careless. The tracks passed the pool and paralleled the small stream below it. At most a meter wide and ankle deep, the clear water rippled maybe a hundred meters before sinking out of sight into the sand. During the Wet, the trickle would become a small river and, after five or six kilometers, churn north into Yoygin Creek or south into Forrest Creek. But in the Dry, it disappeared into its bed to feed the mulga.

Another hundred meters beyond the sink he found tire tracks beginning to fill with sand. They came straight in, showing no sign of a turn. Backed in or out. One man. Knew where Mitchell waited. Drove a vehicle. Wore good, new boots. Careless about leaving a trail. Carried something heavy back. Could afford an expensive weapon.

Waving at the flies, he walked beside the tire tracks. A chip of rose-colored stone about half the size of his palm lay to the right of the ruts and caught his eye. Turning it over, he ran his thumb across its scalloped edge. It had been flaked off an outcropping—the scallops were made by a tool—but it was an outcropping

somewhere away from this place. Here was only faded orange sand and pebbly gravel drifted by centuries of wind and punctuated by brief floods of churning water. Someone had brought this chip here. Leonard smelled it, touched his tongue to it, felt the hot, dry stone suck his tongue's moisture. Then he buttoned the flake into his shirt pocket and slowly followed the tracks until a spur showed where the vehicle had turned. They led out of sight across sandy hills to the south, ninety, a hundred kilometers, toward the Gibb Road. Leonard thought about the weapon of a city criminal, about someone who could find his way through all that bush to this empty spot. And about the GPS Leonard used to find this same spot.

The sign for the Barramundi Paradise Tackle and Bait Shop was wider than the one-room frame building that held it. Both faced the paved road where tourists drove from the Zoological Park and Crocodile Farm to the Five Rivers Lookout. Leonard's shadow, long in the afternoon sun, rippled up the two steps of the front veranda. Inside, an unsmiling woman watched two fishermen poke through lures, hooks, and spools of line. Leonard read posted fishing maps and adverts for guides as he, too, waited for the tourists to finish.

"Bloke said six hundred pound test," said the one with a mustache. "Oi, missus, you really got barramundi up here weigh a hundred and sixty kilos?"

The woman's eyes, bulged from some kind of thyroid problem, were unblinking. "We got 'em."

"Costliest bloody line in the shop," muttered the one in a new Akubra Pilbara hat.

"Yeah. That's why the guides don't provide the gear. Probably get a bloody kickback from the old girl too. Let's do it and get on."

"Right. Finny tribe's a-waiting."

"All right, missus, tote up. Bloody well hope your barramundi are worth the cost!"

Silently she totaled the bill. The fishermen gathered up their stubby rods, heavy reels, and sacks of line and hooks. They glanced guardedly at the copper on their way out; Leonard smiled and nodded.

A voice floated back through the closing screen door. "They got Abo everything here, coppers and all."

"Coppers probably sell for a sight less than this stuff."

Leonard introduced himself. "I'm sorry about your son, Mrs. Mitchell. But I wonder if I could ask you a few questions. It might help us find his killer."

She took a deep, shuddering breath as if fighting a spasm of pain. Her eyes went bloodshot, but no tears were allowed.

"Do you have any idea why anybody might have done this?"

"No." The quick answer came with an emphatic shake of her head.

"Can you tell me where he worked?"

"Sometime over at Kununurra—one of the big farms over there."

"He was working there when he died?"

"Off and on."

"Did he ever visit Darwin or Sydney or the other cities?"

The eyes blinked. "Once in a while maybe."

Leonard tried another direction. "Do you know why he was speared in the leg?"

A quick shake of her head.

"He never told you about being speared? You never saw him limp?"

"No."

He smiled as if he believed the woman. "I understand he bought this shop for you."

"He was a good man—a good son."

"Yes. He did a good thing. Where did he get the money?"

Her nostrils flared a bit as if she smelled danger. "He worked for it. He was a good son!"

He nodded again. "How long have you had this shop?"

"A year—a little longer." The door opened and a cluster of tourists crowded in. The woman looked at them with relief. "It's the busy time, Constable. Anything else?"

Leonard thanked her and sat for a while in the Rover to watch the lowering sun and to think about the cost of fishing line.

The rough drive to Neildu lasted from post-dawn cool to mid-morning heat. Mitchell's aunt was camped among the tanna bushes far enough from the settlement to be undisturbed by its life. Leonard parked at a respectful distance and trudged toward the scrubby trees. Of the half dozen shades, only one covered more than empty sand. Sometimes a camp is for men only, sometimes women only—ancient dreaming sites where they could make spiritual journeys undisturbed. But this one seemed to be where clan elders went for privacy, like old kangaroos or camels that preferred isolation. He cleared his throat loudly. A gray-haired woman in a frayed cotton dress sat cross-legged on a spread of ragged cloth and steadily ground at a rubbing stone. She watched him approach.

ly, Auntie." Stopping far enough away that his boots would
k sand on her cloth, he squatted so he would not look down
at her. "Maybe we can talk?"

"You're that constable—the one come to see about that death."
She took another scoop of mulga beans from the pile beside her
knee and dropped them on the stone.

He nodded, not surprised that in the bush even the wind carried
information. "Got tucker here. Like to share?" From his shoulder
bag, he took out a sleeve of crackers and a tin of sardines. The
woman's rheumy eyes followed the tin; her wide nostrils twitched
when he pulled open its lid. "You got water?"

A hand waved toward a scarred thermos jug set in the cool.
"Cup's there."

She set aside the grinding stone and they shared the food almost
in silence. Leonard expected the woman to ask about his skin rela-
tions, bone relations, language, tribe, and Dreaming. But she did
not. Instead, she praised the tucker, accepted his thanks for the
water, exchanged names with him, and waited.

When the last crumb was nibbled, he began the ritual of asking
questions without asking questions. "Auntie Phyllis, this man was
your nephew."

She nodded. "My sister's son."

"You saw him before he died."

"Three weeks ago." Her shrug held resignation and good-bye.

Near the time he received the stab wounds in his leg. "Tell me
about it."

The woman licked her finger and tasted the mulga paste. "He
came to the village. Peter Williams called him to the village."

"Peter Williams?"

"Law Giver."

"They had a sit-down."

One shoulder lifted in another shrug. "Men's business. I asked
him to tell his mother hello from me."

"That was after the sit-down."

"Before. Didn't see him after."

"Maybe you know something about that sit-down."

She looked surprised at Leonard's ignorance of the gulf between
the worlds of men and women. "Just told you—men's business."

"Maybe your nephew said something about it."

"Said hello. Said he would tell my sister hello. That's it."

Leonard accepted her offer of a dab of mulga paste on a cracker.
The nutty, slightly sour flavor was a fleeting memory of early
childhood before being sent to the state school. "Your sister has a
new fishing shop over at Five Rivers. I hear her son paid for it."

Her eyes shifted to some distant point. "He wanted to take care of her. His dad's dead."

"He must've had a good job somewhere."

A shrug. "Kununurra, maybe. Wyndham. All over, maybe."

Everywhere and nowhere. Leonard waited, but she added nothing. "He was stabbed in the leg. Maybe you know why."

"No."

Was that a look of embarrassment? "I need help, Auntie Phyllis. This is police business now."

"Yeah—white police. Nobody here's going to help white police."

"I'm half-white police. Maybe somebody can give me half-help, eh?"

"Ha!" Teeth flashed in the woman's face, then disappeared like, Leonard thought, a crack of lightning during the Build Up to the Wet.

"Auntie, I can't just let a killer go. Nobody should. This thing will live in the people like a sickness." Leonard made a clawlike clutch at his stomach. "Like cancer, you know? Better not wait until maybe the white police come or payback starts."

The only sound was the hot wind ruffling the leaves. Finally, he fished the chip of red stone from his shirt pocket and placed it on the gingham cloth. "Maybe you can tell me where this came from."

She stared at it for a long time. Slowly, her thin shoulders sagged beneath the faded cotton of her flowered dress. An ant, searching its way across the soiled red and white checks, paused at the chip. She sighed. "You better talk to Theodore Kame." Her eyes stared intently, telling Leonard something without saying anything. "Theodore Kame maybe will help you."

"Where can I find him?"

Her long black fingers wagged toward the bush. "Past Neildu where Forrest Creek and Ernest River come together. Makes pituri there. You talk to him."

Leonard thanked her and stood. She asked for the empty cracker sleeve. As he left, she began dropping the mulga seeds into their new home.

A twisting track jounced above the banks of the Forrest River. Once, Leonard stopped to fill the fuel tank from the vehicle's jerry cans and hoped that, given the cost of petrol, he would find out enough to justify the expense to Sergeant Hall. Near noon, he reached an empty shade. The ash of its fire was still warm. He cooed and, slowly fanning his hat at the heat and flies, waited. In a while, a skinny figure with an unkempt gray beard and wearing

only short pants and laceless boots stepped noiselessly from the brush.

"G'day." A long, gleaming scar puckered the dark flesh of his shoulder.

Leonard introduced himself and said why he was there. "Aunty Phyllis said you might be able to help me."

Theodore Kame scratched in the gray curls on his chest. "Maybe. Lunchtime, now. You want a cuppa?" He nodded toward the blackened billy set under his shade.

"Could use one. Got some tucker in the Esky." Leonard rummaged in the cooler behind the front seat. "You like dried fruit and ham?"

Kame's grin showed stained and missing teeth as he stirred up his fire. "Store bought! We'll have a feast!"

Information waited until after the feast. Wrinkled skin sagging from his bony frame, Kame belched and stretched on the cool, shaded sand with his third cup of tea. "Care for a quid?" He held out a small dark roll.

"Thanks anyway—don't smoke."

"For a chew, not a smoke. This be pituri, City Boy." He gestured popping the oblong wad into his mouth. "Chew it, rub it on your lips, rub behind your ear if you like: good for hunger, good for energy, then good for sleep."

"What's in it?"

"Nicotine. You know us-mob discovered nicotine? American Indians, they claim tobacco, but we be the first. Used to, we traded pituri for ax heads, spear points, whatever. Dry the leaves, mix with acacia ash, use flax to tie it up, and there you are."

"Acacia ash?"

"Yeah. Can use half a dozen woods, but acacia's best. More alkaloid to draw out the nicotine. That's the science of it, anyway." His hand waved over his shoulder toward the shrub-covered cliffs above the streambed. "Good soil, good rock, good pituri. Use it to stir the blood before battle, use the smoke for anesthesia at circumcision ceremonies. No more, of course. Now it's only for a few rituals, or just party time."

"You know a lot about its history."

"Part of me job—Council pays me to be watchman for sacred places hereabouts."

A flash of Aunty Phyllis's intense eyes crossed Leonard's memory. "What sacred places?"

"Rock painting sites mostly."

Leonard fished the rock flake from his shirt pocket. "You recognize this?"

"Ah." Kame gazed at the fragment in his calloused palm. "This has to do with the dead one."

Leonard studied the man's face. "Why do you think so?"

Kame's thumb caressed the chip. "It's from up Mongona-way."

A mountain twenty or so kilometers north, near the Lizard Hollow camp. "How do you know?"

"Color, touch—this color red, the feel of this grit. It's good rock for painting on—porous so the vegetable dye goes in, but not so soft that it bleeds fuzzy-like. And that site's sheltered from the weather by an overhang." The spray of gray hair on the man's head wagged once. "And there's been stealing there."

"Stealing?"

"Somebody tried to cut out a rock painting. Bugged it all to hell. Can't cut that rock without shattering it. So then they started copying."

"How copy?"

"Rubbing. Take greased paper—dripping on tissue maybe—lay it over the painting and rub it with your hand to pick up pigment." Kame dragged the side of one hand across the back of another. "Sometimes, if the painting is etched in, they rub the paper with a soft pencil. Then maybe they transfer it to another stone—plenty rock midden there—and off they go."

"The dead man did this?"

A shrug. "No more since he died."

"When did it start?"

"Two, maybe three years ago. Never caught nobody at it, though—just saw sign."

"It's a crime to copy them?"

"Two crimes. Three, really." He counted them off on long fingers. "One, you got to get the People's permission to copy any Aboriginal art. Two, vandalism. These Oombulgurri rock paintings, they're the only ones like them in the world; but dripping softens the pigment and the rubbing wears it away. Three, it steals the soul of the painting. An Old One left himself there for his people, but then somebody copies it and sells it to somebody else."

"For a lot of money?"

"Aboriginal art's big business, now: museums, rich collectors, tourists."

The evening duty watch waved Leonard toward a vacated desk. "Use that telephone, mate. Don't forget to log your calls—Sergeant gets fussy about that."

Leonard first telephoned the Sydney district headquarters, telling

the duty clerk what he needed, how quickly he needed it, and how to leave the information at the Wyndham Station. When he returned from a late dinner, some of his questions had been answered: He had a list of telephone numbers to begin calling early in the morning, and a reply from Perth that the pieces of slug taken from the victim were from a .22 caliber, hollow nosed, short round—a cheap bullet most likely fired from a handgun.

The Eastern Time Zone was two hours ahead of Wyndham's, but despite an early start, it took several hours for Leonard to reach the people he wanted to question. Then, finding a quiet corner of the station, he organized his information and considered where it led. Follow-up calls took him almost to noon, then he drove back to the Barramundi Paradise Tackle and Bait Shop.

"I found out where your son got the money to buy this store, Mrs. Mitchell."

The woman's protruding eyes grew even larger. "What's that mean?"

"It means he was selling copies of rock art to a man in Melbourne, a Mr. Steven Reid. Owns the Gallery of Indigenous Arts and Crafts. Told me he bought copies of the paintings and slabs of rock from the original site. Was very proud to say his copies were as close as to the original as humanly possible."

The woman's lips clamped tight, loosened, clamped again as if she chewed something between her front teeth.

"Named your son as his supplier. Said he's become an excellent copyist."

The lips flexed again.

"Was very unhappy to learn about his death."

This time the tears were not held back. They silently spilled over her cheeks as she stared through Leonard as if he were a window to something in the past.

"It's best you tell me everything you know."

Mrs. Mitchell did not know everything, but her guesses fit what Leonard began to see. By the time he neared Lizard Hollow, dusk drew the brush closer to the track and kangaroos began to leap out of the trees and across his headlights. At the cluster of small houses and humpies, figures silhouetted against cooking fires watched him park the Rover and get out stiffly. Silence greeted his request to talk with the camp's Law Giver, Peter Williams. Then a wiry shadow stepped forward.

Later, after sharing food and conversation that masked the real reason for Constable Smith's visit, Peter Williams guided Leonard

along a trail to a council fire that flared in front of a wall of rock. The day's heat still pulsed off the stone and gritty sand, but at least the flies slept. As he waited for the men to gather, Leonard watched sparks rise from the fire and swirl among stars spread across the sky. It was hard to believe there were people who never lifted their eyes from their feet to see a sky like that, people whose city lights blanked their heaven.

It was equally hard to believe that here, at the men's council fire on land that had been home since Dreamtime, no one in Lizard Hollow knew why Roland Mitchell had been killed.

The dozen faces, mostly bearded, remained closed. Dark eyes, webbed red from wood smoke or alcohol or both, shifted from the fire to other faces across the circle, then dropped again. The silence following Leonard's politely oblique questions stretched until Peter Williams, lanky shins and dusty bare feet showing beneath the tattered cuffs of his frayed trousers, tugged at his white beard. "Yeah, Constable, if it was payback-for a tribal law the man broke, we would know. And we don't know. So maybe a waijella done it." Williams added softly, "You said he was shot."

Waijella—"white fella." Leonard let a suitable amount of time pass before replying mildly, "Maybe somebody knows some reason a waijella might want to shoot him."

A beardless young man grunted his wish to speak but remained silent until he was certain none of the older men wanted to talk first. Kenneth—that was the name Leonard heard someone use when the sit-down started—finally said, "A waijella can shoot a black fella like a dingo. Both the same to the waijella. You know that!" A mumble of agreement came from the group.

"I know whoever killed this man—waijella or black fella—he'll have a fair trial."

A silence of unvoiced doubt about the fairness of white justice greeted that statement. Leonard went on. "Old times, maybe the dingo and the black fella were the same. But now we have the Social Justice Act for our rights. We have the Native Title Act for our land claims. Now we have Aboriginal members of Parliament." Leonard tugged at his collar emblem. "We even have Aboriginal coppers."

"That's half a step," said another beardless face. Quiet laughter excused the youth's ill manners in speaking too hastily.

Leonard laughed too—it was a good thrust at his half-white blood. "Yeah, a small step for mankind. But this is murder, and this is a police investigation. The killed man had spear wounds in his leg that he got before he was shot. Maybe whoever killed him speared him first. Maybe he broke tribal law again and so was

killed. Maybe he was killed for some other reason, maybe good, maybe bad. Whatever the case, this is police business now, not tribal law. It will be the right thing to help me find out why this man was killed and who did it."

Kenneth's angry voice broke the silence. "Maybe other things come first, like jobs and health care. White Australians live twenty years more than we do. Ten times as many of our children die than the rest of Australia. What are you doing about those crimes, Constable?" A soft chorus of grunts supported the question.

Leonard nodded. "There are many crimes. I can deal with only a few. I think you can help with this one."

"Yeah! We heard all that Reconciliation talk. We still have four times as much unemployment as the rest of the country. We have tuberculosis too, and AIDS. Even effing leprosy, man! How many lepers in Perth, eh? How many white lepers at all? You going to say you got your job because you're half black? I tell you, you got it because you're half white!"

Another tense silence before Peter Williams spoke again. "We'll think on this. You got everything you need, mate?"

The use of "mate" told Leonard that the question wasn't an offer of help with the murder but of hospitality for the night. "No worries, Peter. Thanks for hearing me." He added in a softer voice, "But I need a word more alone with you."

"What about?"

"What I came for."

The wiry man's shoulders rose and fell beneath his frayed shirt. "Let's take a walk, then."

Leonard followed into the starlit dark, letting his eyes adjust to the gray of sand and the black of painful clumps of spinifex.

After a while, Peter Williams stopped walking. "What did you come for, Constable?"

"The one who killed him."

"Why you think it was one of us-mob?"

Leonard found a comfortable slab of rock and sat, gesturing for Peter Williams to join him. "Because the white man who met him in the bush didn't kill him. He was making money from him. The white man went to get more drawings and more rocks to copy the drawings on."

"Maybe it was another white man."

"No other white man met him there." Leonard smoothed a patch of sand and dragged a finger through it. "One set of tracks in from Gibb River Road." The finger reversed. "The same set out, carrying the rocks. Whoever killed him came through the bush. Whoever killed him knew the land."

"You said he was shot. Gun's a white man's weapon. Everybody knows that."

Leonard nodded. "He was shot. Had me fooled. A .22 pistol, which means the killer had to get close. A bullet that small has to be fired pretty close to the skull."

In the moonlight, the gaunt figure shifted but did not reply.

"He was killed by someone he let get close to him. Maybe someone he knew. Someone who knew the land. Someone who had a reason."

"You don't know who it was. You don't know!"

"He was punished once for stealing pictographs, but he did it again. That's the reason." The shadowy figure did not reply. Leonard went on. "You are a Law Giver, Peter. Maybe you didn't know it was going to happen, maybe you did. Maybe you pulled the trigger, maybe someone else did." The hunched shadow remained silent. Finally Leonard asked, "Were you sent to a state school?"

"What?"

"State school. I was taken to a state school. Orphan. Did they take you too?"

"Yeah. Six years."

Leonard nodded. "Used to hear all the time: 'Behave like you're civilized!' They tell you that too?"

"Yeah—then caned the bloody hell out of us!"

Leonard grinned and rubbed the memory embedded in the backs of his own thighs. "Caned civilization into us, didn't they?"

"Um."

"There's enough to bring white police to Lizard Hollow, Peter. It will be like they're caning the whole camp."

Silence.

"An argument could be made that he was killed because he violated tribal law. It won't justify his death, but it might make the punishment lighter. Especially if the shooter gives himself up. No guarantees, but it might." After another silence, he asked, "Was it you killed him?"

In the dark, Leonard heard a long breath in the man's nose. "No. There were five of us. We tried to get there before he could sell the pictures, but we didn't."

Peter Williams did not go on. Leonard filled in the story. "So you surrounded him. That's how the killer got close behind him."

"Yeah."

"And you took the money he had on him: eight hundred dollars, right?"

"How'd you know?"

"The white man said he paid eight hundred dollars for four rubbings and four good stones. It wasn't found on his body." Leonard let that sink in.

"It wasn't for the money. It was the pictures. They belonged to the People—so the money did." Williams added, "And he been warned!"

"You know that. I know that. You think the white police will believe it? They'll think you murdered him for the money. Murder and robbery. Put all five of you in prison for a long, long time. That's almost half the men in Lizard Hollow. Leaves a lot of women and children without their men—for a long time."

"Yeah."

"It would be better for everybody if whoever pulled the trigger turns himself in. That way, just one goes to prison." He added, "Maybe that money should go to his family."

"I'll think on this."

All in all, it had been a very long and busy day. Spreading his canvas swag on a soft patch of sand near the Rover, Leonard placed boots, water, and torch within easy reach. He shook out his sleeping bag and slid into it, groaning at the stretch of sore muscles, and arranged his trousers as a pillow.

As his tired mind went over what he and Peter Williams agreed on, Leonard stared at the spark of cold blue light that, out of all others filling the night sky, he had focused his thoughts on. Finally, his eyes drooped and he felt his weight sag more heavily against the welcoming earth. Just before sleep the star seemed to wink back.

A week later in Derby, ALC Smith received a telephone call from Sergeant Hall. He was happy to tell Constable Smith that his work wasn't a complete waste of time: One Kenneth Ngariri had just walked out of the bush to give himself up for the murder of Roland Mitchell. 🐦



Loved the story? Share your thoughts in The Readers Forum at www.TheMysteryPlace.com.

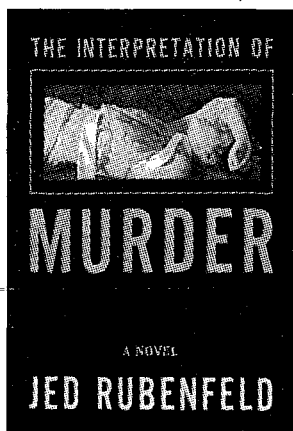
BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

Rubinfeld, Hart & Goldstein has the ring of a high-powered law firm, and if these three gentlemen should ever decide to combine their talents to form a practice they would no doubt be quite successful. Their combined academic and professional pedigrees include Stanford, Brandeis, Columbia Law School, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Juilliard Drama School, Davidson, and Franklin Pierce Law School.

Jed Rubinfeld is an expert on constitutional law. John Hart adds expertise on labor law as well as criminal defense experience. And Paul Goldstein's forte is intellectual property law. Add them together and what do you get? Three lawyers trying to pass a different bar to become successful novelists as others such as John Grisham and Scott Turrow have done before.

As one might expect from the different legal niches they've occupied, these first time novelists have created plots that echo their scholarly or professional interests.



Jed Rubinfeld's *THE INTERPRETATION OF MURDER* (Holt, \$26) draws not on his expertise on constitutional law but rather on two other academic interests. He studied Shakespeare at Juilliard, and his fascination with the conundrum posed by Hamlet's behavior forms a crucial part of his mystery. His undergraduate thesis on Sigmund Freud allows him to combine what he learned with intelligent speculation to cast Freud as a major character in his novel and to provide an answer to a question that has puzzled Freud scholars for almost a century.

Set in 1909, Rubinfeld's debut mystery deals with Freud's first and only trip to the United States. Although the actual trip was a success, it left Freud with a bitterness toward the United States that has puzzled scholars ever since. Rubinfeld believes that some unknown event may have caused that reaction, and his novel

posits a murder, a conspiracy, and jealousies among Freud's followers that all contribute to that reaction.

Young American psychologist Stratham Younger, an admirer of Freud, plays psychoanalyst and detective when a young woman is viciously attacked and left mute as an aftereffect. With Freud acting as adviser, Younger attends the victim. The investigation veers into many unexpected directions, allowing Rubinfeld to explore and exploit the rich political and cultural history of New York at the turn of the century, including such events as Harry Thaw's murder of architect Stanford White and the building of the Manhattan Bridge.

Taken as a mystery, it plays nicely as a period story. Taken as a novel, it provides a fascinating, though fictional, portrait of Freud, Carl Jung, and other adherents and detractors of Freud's revolutionary theories. Rubinfeld's author's note following the conclusion of the book is a careful attempt to clarify any liberties he has taken with factual matters.

John Hart's protagonist in *THE KING OF LIES* (St. Martin's/Thomas Dunne, \$22.95) is a lawyer, but not a very successful one. In fact, Jackson Workman Pickens, commonly known as "Work," can't count too many ways that he is successful despite a fair amount of wealth, a beautiful and accomplished wife, and a position in the large North Carolina law practice built from scratch by his father, Ezra.

The thin façade of normalcy hides a precarious house of cards that begins its inexorable tumble when the body of Work's father, missing for eighteen months, is finally discovered.

Ugly secrets about Work's family are sure to emerge when the police begin investigating what immediately changes from a missing persons case to a homicide investigation. And Work, knowing the circumstances of his father's disappearance is almost certain that his psychologically fragile sister, Jean, is responsible for his death.

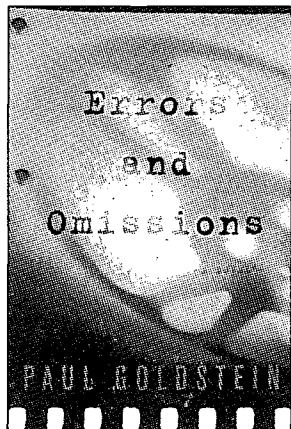
Work plays a dangerous game attempting to divert suspicion from his sister while directing it subtly at himself and at the same time trying not to create enough rope for a skillful prosecutor and an avid detective to use to hang him.

In Hart's rich prose, a man's life disintegrates as a combination of self-discovery and circumstances bind him in a web of lies and deceit that threaten to ruin his life and perhaps end it. Work's ambitious society wife; the aggressive detective pursuing him; his alienated sister and her secretive, protective lesbian lover; the colleagues who are quick to abandon him; the few, unlikely friends who stand by him—all are sharply limned by Hart, who handles

his complex plot and large cast with great verve. The end result is a psychological thriller of depth and character, and while Work Pickens doesn't seem cut out for a series character, Hart seems to have hit on a good choice for a second career.

Paul Goldstein's first novel **ERRORS AND OMISSIONS** (Doubleday, \$24.95) is grounded solidly in his area of legal expertise as his lawyer hero, Michael Seeley, gets involved in a case that not only involves the complex, sometimes arcane, ramifications of intellectual property laws, but also explores the roots and the rancid results of the McCarthy-era witch hunts that blacklisted so many Hollywood writers, actors, and directors.

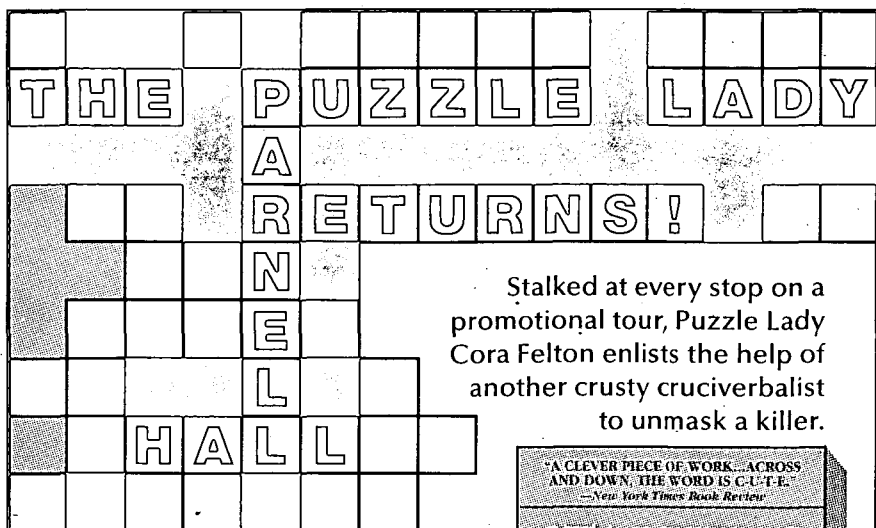
Seeley is an alcoholic and a crusader. Whereas he once was a hot-shot lawyer recruited by his high-powered Manhattan law firm and known for his pro bono work, now Seeley's career and his marriage are both headed for the rocks. He's offered a chance at reviving his career, if not his marriage, when his firm tells him that United Pictures, a subsidiary of the firm's biggest client, asks for him to come to Hollywood to write an E&O (errors and omissions) opinion for them concerning copyright ownership.



The property in question is the script for a 1950s noir film called *Spykiller* that was of no importance until it was revived as the basis for an enormously successful series of action films. Then a ruling by the Supreme Court brought ownership of the script into question and simultaneously threatened the studio's rights to the entire film franchise. The putative author of the script has refused the studio's generous offers to buy the rights to the script. Hence the need to hire Seeley and enlist his skills in the effort to prove the studio owned the rights in question.

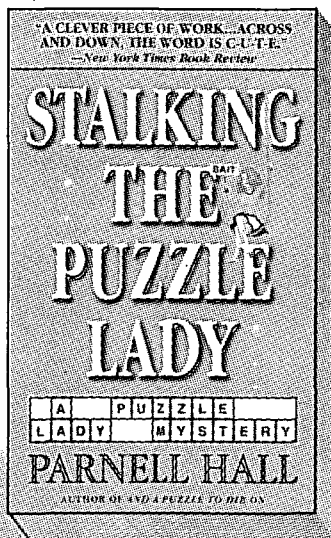
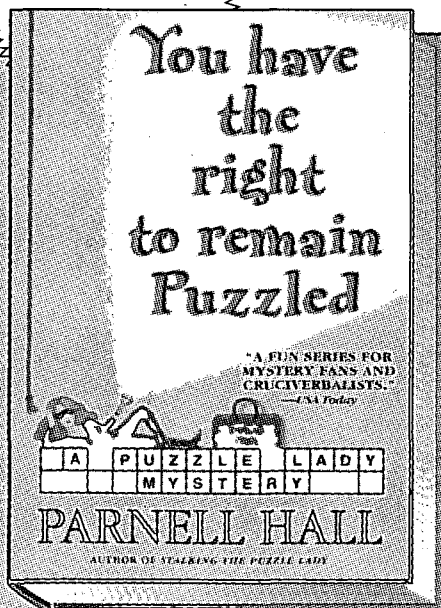
Goldstein turns the potentially dry subject of intellectual property into a riveting thriller and a history lesson as Seeley tracks down the reclusive author and others involved with the original film. The blacklist and the impetus behind it, the greed and power of the studios, and the search for the real story behind the script will send Seeley and a competitor to Germany for the key buried in the murk of Nazi-occupied Poland.

Rubinfeld, Hart, and Goldstein—not a law firm but a trio of attorneys whose debut efforts win a collective verdict of top-notch entertainment.



Stalked at every stop on a promotional tour, Puzzle Lady Cora Felton enlists the help of another crusty cruciverbalist to unmask a killer.

On sale in
hardcover 10/31



When a two-bit gambler with a knack for creating crosswords is found dead, the Puzzle Lady finds herself knee-deep in a case that only she can solve.

Killer crossword puzzles in each mystery!



Bantam

Wherever books are sold • www.parnellhall.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SQUARE ONE

LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

The bar in the new Hilton Garden Inn in Harmonie Park is a pleasant place to sit and listen to the bartenders clinking their instruments and watch baseball on the liquid-crystal screen in the corner; two or three more games and it will be a year-round sport. I don't go there often. I spend less on a bottle of red wine than the place charges for a glass of decent scotch.

That day I went. Ed Warburton had done me a favor as commander of the eleventh precinct when he could just as well have jailed me as a material witness, and had a round bought in his honor at the local cop hangout that evening. I'm unpopular there as a rule. The break had given me a chance to close out an investigation I'd been working three weeks, and Warburton to clear up a police case that had hung fire for more than a year. When he called me at the office and asked me to meet him in the Hilton bar, I took out a loan and drove down.

I didn't ask why he'd chosen a spot so far from his home park. When a cop stumbles and falls on his sword, his colleagues give him a door-busting going-away party in a private room above a saloon and then the dustoff. It isn't that they're ashamed, or disapprove of what he did. Cops are superstitious and convinced that bad luck is contagious. No one's safe if a Detroit police commander can get caught with his thumb in the till.

Not that he had. Six officers from his precinct had gone up on charges of substituting confectioners' sugar for twenty kilos of cocaine in the evidence room, and brass is expected to know about such things. Even then he might have come off with a reprimand and possibly demotion to inspector, but when the jury voted to acquit the officers, the department had had to let blood somewhere. He'd resigned after being relieved of his duties.

It was the middle of the afternoon. A man and woman in business dress had the bartender to themselves at the bar. No one was watching the game. Warburton lifted a hand, and when I went over to his booth raised himself six inches to shake hands. He was fifty and looked it, with less hair than I remembered, and the stoop was new, but if I'd had twenty years on him I wouldn't have chosen him. He

stood six two with no body fat and his grip would bend a coconut.

"Thanks for coming, Amos. What are you drinking?"

I knew then the occasion wasn't social. Cops only call me by my first name when they want something. "What are you?"

He held up his glass, a narrow tumbler half filled with sparkling water, with a lemon wedge straddling the top. "French fizzie. I haven't had a nibble in a week."

"Program?"

"Experiment. I like the stuff. I want to see if I need it. No pink eels yet." He

No one's safe if a Detroit police commander can get caught with his thumb in the till.

drank and made the sort of face a seasoned drinker makes over carbonated water. He had a long, humorous face, like the put-upon father in a 1950s sitcom. His suit was pressed but his tie was at half-mast. That and the teetotaling were his only visible concessions to his situation. I lured the help away from the couple at the bar and ordered a scotch.

"What's your fee?" Warburton asked when I had it and we were alone again.

I drank. It tasted sweet, not like the paintstrip I kept at home. "Depends on the work. I can run a credit check in an hour, that's forty. Otherwise, five hundred a day, with three days up front for seed. If you want me to scratch up dirt on the chief, I'll need a little more. No hospitalization," I explained.

"You wouldn't have to dig too deep. She's the mayor's creature, and we know what he is. You never see those two apart. I wouldn't take them on in a sack race."

"She slam-dunked you pretty hard."

"I don't hold it against her. Not much. She's got the feds sitting in her lap. A whole line of chiefs crooked the joint before she came along. I want you to put in a word," he said. "It shouldn't take three days."

"I don't know the chief. It would take that long to get past the reception room, and then I might as well hit her up for a personal loan while I'm there. I'll get the same answer."

"Not with the chief. With Inspector Alderdyce. You two go back."

"Our fathers ran a gas station together. We entered training the same day. I washed out a week short, he stayed on. That's our history. We swap favors now and then, but right now I'm in the red. Even if I weren't, there's no way an endorsement from either of us will put you back in charge of the eleventh."

"I don't want that. I'm asking you to ask him to ask the chief to green-light my application to rejoin the department at entry level."

I drank again. "You want to get back into the blue bag?"

"I'll take cadet if I have to. I'd rather not. They're making those scaling walls higher than they did thirty years ago. I can file, hold down the front desk, get coffee for the C.I.D. Free up a younger man for the streets. I know I can't be Supercop. See? No delusions. Next week maybe I'll go back to drinking beer." He drained off his glass and set it down with a thump.

"What's the gag?"

"It's legit. I bit the moose hard; lost my pension, almost lost my wife. My daughter won't speak to me. The twerp she married wants to be drain commissioner, but that won't happen thanks to good old dad. I could write a book, or take security work, but I don't want that. I want to go back to square one and this time roll the dice with the other hand."

"The chief won't go for it," I said. "It's like cutting the end off a blanket and stitching it back on the other end. They'll fry her in the media."

"Everybody deserves a second chance. That's the spin. I'm physically fit, no misdemeanors or felonies, and it wouldn't be the first time a middle-aged man was accepted for duty."

"It's her head if you screw up again. She won't go for it."

"She's forgotten what it was like in the ranks. She put me down as incompetent because I couldn't offer evidence against those six officers. It never occurred to her I wouldn't because you don't rat on a brother cop."

"You knew?"

He frowned. "This conversation is like attorney-client privilege, right? To you, I mean; it doesn't swing a flea's weight in court, but I know you've gone into the cage over it in the past. Your file makes good reading at the dentist's."

"If I entertain you, I've done my job. I'm not writing my memoirs anytime soon, if that's what you're worried about."

"Not worried. Just wanted to know how wide I can open up. I wouldn't have to explain this brothers-in-blue business to Alderdyce. He may run Homicide, but his heart's still in uniform."

"So ask him to put the word in with the chief. What do you need me for?"

"You might have noticed I'm not shaking friends from the department off my lapels just now. Being seen with a disgraced character like me might not make a grease spot in his jacket downtown, but it wouldn't win him points next time he comes up for promotion. A man like John wouldn't refuse to see me, but I can't do that to him."

"I'm not exactly a photo op myself," I said.

"Don't flatter yourself. You're a bug on the radar at best."

"Since you put it that way, go to hell." I drank off my scotch and slid to the end of the booth.

Warburton had the reflexes of a rookie. His hand clamped my wrist.

"Let's not fight," he said. "When you've been called six kinds of an imbecile where your wife and your kids and all their friends can see it, you let fly at whatever's in range."

I settled back against the seat. I still felt the pressure of his fingers on my wrist after he let go. "I have to work in this town," I said, "which means getting along with chiefs and inspectors, inspectors especially. Forget about convincing the chief for now. First you have to convince me you're not just dicking around."

"My God, man, I'm degrading myself in front of the world. Why would I make it up?"

"It's got Spike TV all over it. All you'd have to do is stick it out long enough to interest some hack, sell the idea to New York and L.A., and bug out before your appointment comes up for the department physical. That makes everyone else look like an imbecile, and guess who takes the heat? I don't like security work any more than you do, but that's all I'll have left this side of a refrigerator box on Gratiot. That's if they let me."

"I'm not grandstanding. I took an oath to serve and protect, that's the job. I got so busy trying to keep the job, I forgot to do it. This is the one shot I've got to make up for it."

If he'd popped a tear, or put a throb in his throat, or hauled out the speech about a man's word being all he has left in the finish, I'd have paid for my drink and left there and then. But his face was as calm and clear as a reflecting pool. I believed him.

"I'll talk to him," I said. "That's as far as promising goes. Working on keeping the job is the slogan they ought to paint on the squad cars."

He reached inside his coat and slid out a checkbook bound in marbled blue leather. I stopped him before he clicked his pen.

"Pay the bartender. Stand up for me at my next arraignment."

I caught up with Inspector John Alderdyce in the Detroit Athletic Club, swimming laps around the pool where Johnny Weissmuller had trained for the Olympics. The gymnasium was more brightly lit than it had been for thirty years, when a brick wall had blocked the view of a decomposing city. Now it looked out on the larger-than-life statues of dead ballplayers in Comerica Park.

Anthropologists say that black men haven't the buoyancy to break records in the water, but they hadn't seen Alderdyce, dark and gleaming, arms and legs slicing the surface like a water rocket. There was no one present to enforce the rules, so I lit a cigarette

and waited while he circled twice and climbed out. The water came off him in sheets, like rain from a locomotive. He'd put on weight around the middle, but he was all slabbed muscle through the chest and shoulders, with a head hewn roughly like a chainsaw sculpture from a living tree.

"Put that out," he said. "I'm on probation here six more weeks."

I squashed out the butt on the tiles while he towed off and put on a terrycloth robe with the DAC monogram above the pocket. We sat down in a pair of folding chairs with woven plastic seats and I got right to it.

"Why didn't Ed come see me in person?" he asked when I'd finished.

"He says he's a pariah."

"You're not?"

"I made the same argument. He said I wasn't in his league."

"He doesn't know you like I do."

"What do I tell him?"

"I'll think about it."

"That means no."

"No means no. 'I'll think about it' means I've got a stack of homicides on my desk that won't investigate themselves. What's your end?"

"Not a cent. I owed him a solid."

"I don't."

"He knows that."

"What's my end if I deliver?" he asked. "I mean from you."

"There isn't one from me. Personally, I don't care if Ed Warburton's name shows up in the morning roll or not. He got a raw deal if he's telling the truth, but this mayor and this chief hardly ever deal any other way. I don't have the time or the capital to square up the deck every week."

"Think he's on the level?"

"He made all the right faces when he was talking, but you cops all got more personalities than Mel Blanc. For what it's worth, I think he wants to clean the slate."

"Tell Ed I'll call him."

Warburton called me at home a week later. I don't know where he got the number. It was late and he was drunk.

I said, "I guess you didn't see any pink eels."

"I'm celebrating," he said. "You're talking to Officer Edward Thomas Warburton. That's unofficial until they give me the oath, but I'm taking it out for a test drive."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks, Walker. John gave me the news an hour ago. The chief

waived training. All I have to do is pass the physical and qualify on the range."

"Bet she's hoping you'll fail one or the other."

"I won't, though. I've never missed a doctor's appointment or a target. I've got fifteen years till mandatory. I might make lieutenant. Then I'll be in a position to even things up with you."

"If I'm still doing what I'm doing fifteen years from now, that might mean asking you to put a round in my head."

"I'd like to buy you another drink."

"No, you don't. A fresh fish like you can't afford to be seen in public with a disgraced character like me."

We continued in that vein for five seconds more and then were through talking. We were back to last names and that was just fine. I never heard from him again. But I heard about him plenty.

A writer who'd ghosted three presidential memoirs split a publishing contract with Warburton and brought out his story under the title *Second Chance*. Before it appeared, a Hollywood studio bought the rights to adapt it, but the circumstances themselves were public domain, and at one point a movie company, a broadcast TV network, and a satellite station had all announced plans to dramatize the story: Kevin Costner, Kiefer Sutherland, and Denzel Washington entered into negotiations to play the lead. No cameras turned on any of the productions and the book went into remaindering after one printing.

Ten months after Officer Warburton raised his right hand and promised to serve and protect his community on CBS, NBC, ABC, and CNN, officers with the General Service Bureau arrested him for embezzling forty thousand dollars from the stash the department kept for buying drugs in sting operations. Subsequent investigation revealed he's lost that much at least in the three casinos in town.

He was dismissed by order of the chief of police, found guilty of grand theft, and sentenced to serve eight to twelve years at hard labor in the state penitentiary in Jackson, where he was placed in isolation to protect him from the convicts he'd helped send there. His wife divorced him, his daughter's husband lost his bid for public office, and his son changed his name. Meanwhile, the FBI informed the chief it was expanding its probe of the department, and Inspector John Alderdyce was suspended for three weeks with pay while General Service investigated his connections with Warburton. His membership in the Detroit Athletic Club was canceled.

My name didn't come up in any of the press conferences that accompanied the story, but I got my car into a garage to bring all the safety equipment up to date. These days I can't afford to be stopped for even a broken taillight in the city of Detroit. ♀

THE CASE OF THE OLYMPIC CUP

JOE HELGERSON

I owe my first stretch as a dead man all to Sheriff Huck. Call me ungrateful if you want, but the next time he's in hasty need of a corpse, he can go whistling at some other deputy's keyhole. Being dead takes a pile more work than you might expect, especially with the sheriff in charge of your remains.

"Just lay low and hold your breath," he said in a hush, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "You can manage that much, can't you?"

Well of course I could. Matter of fact, I was something of a champion when it came to holding my breath. The skill had come in handy since turning lawman and having to deal with remains that ranged from fly-blow to bleach-boned. But before I got around to sucking down my last breath, I had a question that I was—so to speak—dying to ask.

"What's that bowie knife for?"

"Never you mind about that," said the sheriff, exasperated.

Tucking the knife under his armpit, the sheriff carefully lifted a blue glass bottle from a coat pocket. Though the afternoon was hot as a boiler room and humid as the bottom of the river, the sheriff was wearing white officer's gloves while doing all this, so *never you mind* wasn't anywhere near answer enough for me. You see, Sheriff Huck never wore gloves. Tugging them on and off would have come under the heading of work, which the sheriff opposed in all forms.

"You're not talking to Deputy Tom," I reminded him.

Time was when my fellow deputy would have been first in line for a job so full of glory as playing dead, but those days had faded into the mists. Deputy Tom had turned in his badge and announced he was running against the sheriff in the upcoming elections. It was

a sore point, so naturally I brought it up every chance I got.

"All right," the Sheriff groused. "The knife's for explaining things. That make you happy?"

"What kind of things?"

"How-you-got-dead kind of things."

"What's in the bottle?" I asked, watching him uncork the blue-glass bottle as I eased to the floor.

"Now what do you think?" he snapped. "Seeing as how somebody just stuck this knife halfway through you."

'Course the sticking had only happened in the sheriff's mind, which was the one part of him that got exercised regularly.

"Blood?" I guessed.

"From a pig that's done using it," he agreed. "Now hold still."

And he poured a good sized pool of it on my shirt front, right over my deputy badge. Dropping the bowie knife at my side, he emptied the rest of the bottle over the big blade and told me to make myself comfortable.

"In about two minutes I'll be sending Wattle in here," he said.

"He's liable to start screaming," I pointed out. Wattle McFee was on the excitable side.

"I'm counting on it," the sheriff said. "You just do your part and leave the rest up to me."

It was that last bit that had me most worried. Pharaoh had probably fed Moses a line about the same size.

It was about as late as you could get in the summer of 1904, and Sheriff Huck had drafted me and four other sides of beef to accompany him down the Mississippi, from our hometown of Marquis, Iowa, to St. Louis. We were headed to the third Olympiad, which was joined at the hip with a world's fair that St. Louis was throwing. All the world was watching, leastways that's what all the posted bills claimed. The movers and shakers behind the fair had knocked down a small forest, rearranged a stream, and thrown up an entire city to house the fair. The whole spread covered over a thousand acres.

We were headed down there to compete for the Tug-of-War Olympic Cup, which the sheriff was all a-sweat to win because his popularity had the sags. It'd come to light that'd he'd made a mistake or two in his youth. Follies, he called them, but the voters of Marquis weren't so forgiving. Worse yet, former Deputy Tom spent all his time asking folks if they really wanted a sheriff who'd pulled his name out of a book written for kids. (Sheriff Huck Finn's God-given name was too sissy sounding for law work, so he'd paid one of Mr. Mark Twain's books a visit.) According to ex-Deputy Tom,

books were fine things for pressing prairie flowers, but they had their limits.

That's what was behind the sheriff's brainstorm of winning a cup at the Olympics. Anyone who could lead a bunch of he-men to a world championship ought to make a pretty good lawman, or so the sheriff reasoned the voters would think. The way ex-Deputy Tom turned all peppery when he heard about it? It seemed the sheriff was onto something surefire.

So everything was looking pretty sunny till we boarded the downriver steamer and found Sheriff Pericles Britches, from across the river at Split Rock, Illinois, training on the steerage deck with all his brothers. Somebody had put it in their heads to enter the tug-of-war competition too. And who should be grinning beside them but former Deputy Tom. You see, the five Britches brothers were a bunch of square-jawed, bronze-muscled, redheaded Samsons, without a Delilah in sight. They probably could have won a tug with a herd of bull elephants.

Two days later I found myself flat on my back with a bloody bowie knife for company.

The light from Wattle McFee's lantern filled the room for all of two seconds before I heard. "E-o-o-o-o-o!"

If I hadn't known otherwise, I might have thought someone had dumped scalding water down his pants.

The room went black as he stumbled back out, bawling, "Sheriff! Sher-iff!"

Boots hit the floor running. Nearby doors were flung open, followed by shouts of "Quiet down!" During all that I sneaked a gulp of air and tried to get comfy. The next thing I heard was the sheriff's sleepy but mad voice, the one he used when having to dodge middle-of-the-night law work.

"What is it, Wattle?"

"Someone's finally gone and done it, Sheriff. They've killed Injun Joe."

That'd be me. The sheriff didn't care for my real name of Stanley Two-shot, so he dipped into one of Mr. Twain's books again.

Pretty soon there were boots tramping into the room that me and Wattle had been sharing, though calling it a room was being considerably generous. Stable stall was closer to the mark. With the hundreds of thousands of people parading through St. Louis for the World's Fair, hotel rooms were at a premium. Pricey too. So the sheriff did what he usually did, handed out horse blankets and cut corners. With the whole team assembled, I got to hear their say over my last remains.

"He was a noble savage," said the Reverend Farley, who was a circuit minister and part-time butcher, with forearms thick as hams and a heart of about the same dimensions.

"Could have been me lying there," Wattle moaned from outside the stall where he held the lantern.

I guessed that all three of Wattle's fat chins were bobbing away at that thought. He was probably splashing on rose water too, the way he did whenever he thought no one was looking. His work as a blacksmith left smoke clinging to him, as I knew from sharing a horse blanket with him, especially when he draped an arm over my shoulder as we slept. (Thinking about all this helped me forget the fierce itch marching around the bottom of my foot, which I didn't scratch, not so long as I was dead.)

"We sure he's dead?" asked Cyrus Withering, a six foot tall undertaker who was awful possessive on the topic of the dearly departed. "Lift his hand. See if it flops."

The sheriff lifted my hand, and I passed the flop test.

"He's gone on ahead of us, all right," said Reverend Farley, removing his black hat.

"Kind of hard to tell where he's gone with these shadows," said Tom Hefland, the last member of our team. He farmed north of Marquis and had a farmer's common sense.

"Bring that light closer," Sheriff Huck ordered.

While Wattle handed the lantern closer, I eased in another breath. Then, with the light hanging somewhere above me, Wattle gasped, "What's that?"

"Where I come from," Tom Hefland observed, "it's called a knife. That stuff on his chest is called blood."

"Whoa boys," said the sheriff. "I'm afraid it's looking like foul play."

"It appears there's a sinner on the loose," Reverend Farley reluctantly agreed.

"Only one?" Sheriff Huck said. "Has anyone seen Joe having a set-to with anybody?"

There wasn't much to kick around there; I'm a peaceable giant.

After a bit, Cyrus knocked on wood, saying, "Didn't Joe and that Tully Britches get into some kind of pushing and shoving over to the perfume fountain?"

There was some truth to that, though the scuffle wasn't my doing. In the days leading up to the tug-of-war competition, Sheriff Huck had been keeping a close eye on the Britches boys, and when he spied one of them drifting into the World's Fair Palace of Liberal Arts, he gave chase, pulling me along. It turned out that Tully Britches was sneaking in there for a whiff of the famous perfumed fountain, which wasn't exactly the kind of

pastime the big, strapping Britches clan was known for. Seeing Tully bend over for a sniff, the sheriff shoved me against him, knocking him head first into the fountain.

Tully came out smelling like ambrosia and swinging like Sullivan. Ladies in flowery hats went squealing everywhere.

"That wasn't anything," the sheriff said, dismissing the notion but sounding relieved that someone had remembered it too. "Leastways, not something to kill a man over."

"Those Britches boys have sent me some business over the years," Cyrus said, referring to caskets that needed filling.

"I thought," Wattle squeaked with a shudder, "all the Britches boys had a letter P to the front of their names?"

"Oh they do," said the sheriff, who was something of an expert on the Britches clan. He and Pericles, the eldest brother, had had some run-ins over the years. "Tully's ma wrote Penrod in the family Good Book, but he never cared for the sound of it."

"He the one never married?" Reverend Farley asked.

"The same," answered the sheriff. "Keeps to himself a good deal."

I could feel the hangman's noose tightening around Tully's thick neck already, which seemed a mighty raw thing to let happen, even to a Britches. But since there was still plenty of time to save Tully's neck, if it came to that, and since I had a terrible curiosity crackling inside to find out what the sheriff was up to, I went on being dead.

"We just can't allow folks to go around bumping off lawmen," the sheriff said, his tone telling me that he was pulling one of his thoughtful faces. "There's no telling where it would lead. But for now, maybe we'd better clear out until the local constabulary has a chance to take a look here."

Thank God. My lungs were fit to burst.

Last to leave was the sheriff, who knelt down beside me as if wanting one last word with a fallen comrade. Real low, he says, "There's a loose board in the back wall, to the bottom. Meet me at the gymnasium in five minutes."

After a bit, I collected the bowie knife, rolled across the floor, and pushed out the board the sheriff had mentioned. Replacing the board, I slunk over to the gymnasium at Washington University, which stood next to the fair and was hosting the Olympics. Sheriff Huck was hanging back in the shadows.

"What's that you're holding?" he said, gruff like, the way he gets whenever I show some gumption.

"The knife that killed me."

"Hand it over," he said, but before putting out a hand for it, he

fumbled around in a coat pocket for those white gloves again. "You've got a bright future as a dead man, Joe. Now why don't you just lay low for a couple of days, over to the Sioux village at the fair would probably be the spot, someplace you can blend in. By then this will have all blown over and you can rejoin the living. Go on now, git. I'm supposed to be hunting up the law."

And that was all he told me, which was typical, to say nothing of predictable. When he slipped me a gold double-eagle and gave me a shove, I naturally gave the coin a bite, just to see.

Into the night I plunged, headed for the nearest stop of the electric railroad. The railroad swept me down the fair's pike, where thousands of lights blazed away bright as day. People said that Edison fella helped put 'em in himself.

I pulled up my collar and bent down my hat brim, not wanting to be recognized. When the sheriff gave me an order, I generally tried to carry it out, even if it didn't make any sense, which it usually didn't. Fact was, it was mostly because his orders made so little sense that I followed them. I was always kind of hoping the reason for them would catch up to me along the way. Every once in a while the fogs parted and his orders made sense for a second or two. Whenever that happened, I felt a tiny step closer to understanding the difference between a pale white man, such as the sheriff, and a nut-brown red man, such as myself.

But as to why I was pretending to be dead, the reason for that stayed muddy no matter how long I slogged after it. A mile or two went by before I gave up worrying about the sheriff's reasons and got busy taking in the sights.

The electric car bumped past the Festival Hall's dome, which was built bigger than St. Peter's of Rome. Everything at a come-out like this fair was billed as bigger or better than something, so the waters of the Grand Basin reflected enough palaces to keep your eyes bugging clear around the clock. What's more, almost everything you saw was made out of something called plaster of Paris and set to be tore down once the fair ended. Come back in a year and it'd all be gone, a fact that made the whole place seem like an illusion. If there was anywhere a live person could pretend to be dead and get away with it, the fair was it.

Eventually I swung off the train and made my way to the Anthropological Pavilion, where tribes of people from around the world got to show off how they did things. The headhunters from the Philippines, which we'd recently won from Spain, stole the show, but there was also Patagonian, African, and Japanese tribes showing their wares and eating everything from fried grasshoppers to boiled dog.

In no time at all I found a Sioux village and hooked up with a teepee holding the Chasingbear family, who took me in like a lost brother. They didn't ask questions about where I was from, or where I was going to, or leastways not too many questions, not after I told them I was on the run.

For the next couple of days I ate their stews and spent the sheriff's double-eagle on newfangled fair food like hot dogs and ice-cream cones. Old George Chasingbear told me a dozen times how he helped rub out Custer. On the second day I read about my demise in the paper.

FIRST DEAD, NOW MISSING

The remains of Stanley Two-shot, Olympic competitor late of Marquis, Iowa, are missing as of Thursday night. His teammates on a tug-of-war squad found him dead at the Kensington Lodge, formerly known as Tommy O'Rourke's Livery. Cause of death is thought to be a knife wound. An investigation is pending. Anyone with information concerning the whereabouts of the deceased should contact authorities.

That was buried on page five. Page one ran a story about the Philippine Igorots, who stood accused of kidnapping local dogs for their cooking pots. The St. Louis Humane Society was up in arms, but President Roosevelt sided with the tribesmen, observing that guests should be allowed their customs.

When I asked George Chasingbear if he'd heard about any dogs being cooked up thereabouts, he promised to take me to a cook-out that very night. But when the time came, I couldn't quite face the menu. Too much time around white men, I guess.

I slipped off the first chance I got, heading down to the Great Basin, where the black waters reflected all the glory of the surrounding palaces, and you could take a tippy but romantic ride on a gondola, if you could find one open. I couldn't. There was some kind of men's glee club hogging all the boats, so I wandered around in the shadows for an hour or two before heading back to the Chasingbears' teepee, where I had to listen to George sing "Meet me in St. Louie, Louie," which was flying off everyone's lips. Along with roast dog there'd been plenty of drinks, so George made it pretty hot for that song.

A follow-up article on my death appeared in the next day's paper, moving up to page four:

TUG-OF-WAR FUROR

The Honorable Sheriff Huckleberry Finn, of Marquis, Iowa,

and captain of that town's tug-of-war contestants, has lodged a complaint against a competing team from Split Rock, Illinois. Said Sheriff Finn, "There's foul play afoot. I'm afraid they've done away with our anchor man and disposed of his remains, which is a travesty against civilization and sportsmanship. We'll find a replacement and continue on against the odds, but in the name of fair play, we ask that the Split Rock team be disqualified from the Olympic competition.

Well, there it was, my moment of clarity concerning why the sheriff had ordered me dead. The paper also printed Sheriff Pericles Britches's reply: "Unfounded accusations is Sheriff H. Finn's calling card. I try not to pay them much mind."

Page one that day carried the marathon race scandal—the winner having sneaked an automobile ride most of the way—and an account of the fist fight that broke out after the fifty yard swimming race. My disappearance was in good company.

On the third day I opened the paper and everything changed in a flash.

SECOND. OLYMPIAN KNIFED

Olympic contestant Penrod "Tully" Britches was found knifed to death last night, the victim of an unknown assailant. The captain of a competing tug-of-war team is being sought for questioning.

Soon as I read of Tully's death, I headed down to the levee to board a steamer headed upriver to Marquis and home, which seemed about the safest place for a dead man such as myself to be. You see, I was the captain of our tug-of-war team. Who told that newspaper I was alive enough to murder someone was a question that burned till I learned the answer, which wasn't long. I'd no more than planted a foot on the steamer's gangplank than ex-Deputy Tom Reywas stepped out of the crowd to say, "Getting around pretty swell for a dead man, ain't we?"

A constable was standing beside him.

Looking out at the world through bars stole my appetite clear away. It didn't help that the view from my window took in the fair's observation wheel,* which climbed twenty-five stories and couldn't help but remind me of all the wonders I was missing.

* In later years called a Ferris wheel.

More logs got thrown on the fire when a reporter climbed a ladder up to my jail cell window in search of a scoop. By then I'd been parked in that cell for two days without a single howdy-do from Sheriff Huck, so I was more than ready to sing. The reporter's offer to team up with me and make some news beat anything else I'd heard.

The next day's banner headline read, DEAD MAN AGREES TO TELL ALL. Aside from selling papers, a headline such as that lit a sizeable fire under the city fathers, whose minds were set on one thing and one thing only—the smooth running of their World's Fair. Murder trials weren't good for that business, and they wanted mine out of the way quick. Judge Carlyle Hooker agreed with them that justice should be swift and had me in his courtroom within the day.

That wasn't fast enough to shake gawkers though. Word of my trial spread like summer lightning, and even a World's Fair can't compete with a defendant who's supposed to already be dead.

The courtroom had three tables in it, and I got the smallest one. When Judge Hooker paraded in, they made me stand up and my knees nearly knocked the table over.

Judge Hooker resembled a potbellied stove with a sooty beard. His eyes glowed like blowed-on coals, and he ran his court the way a steam locomotive holds to rails. When he rang out with what I stood accused of, I felt tied down to those rails.

"Stanley Two-shot, you stand accused of the murder of Penrod Britches. What say you?"

There wasn't enough spit in my mouth to say much of anything. That didn't slow anything down though, not with someone behind me calling out, "He says *not* guilty, Your Honor. He was way too busy being dead to have time for killing anyone."

Gasps popped everywhere, as heads—mine included—snapped around to see who was spouting off. Sheriff Huck had arrived, though I had to look twice to be sure it was him.

Parting the crowd with a cane, he stepped forward, wearing enough white to blind a blizzard. The gold watch chain hanging out of his white vest pocket only added to the glare, as did the silver knob atop his cane. 'Course his hair and mustache were white as always, but waxed and combed to a glow too. A middle-aged widow or two got the fantods and nearly toppled sideways at the sight of him.

"And who might you be?" growled Judge Hooker, not pleased at being upstaged.

"Sheriff Huckleberry Finn, Your Honor. Come to rescue my poor deputy here who's too trusting a soul to mention that all

these charges are as trumped up as the day is long. No doubt the court has been hoodwinked by an ex-deputy of mine who's been known to see best through the bottom of a jug of forty-rod."

The sheriff had a point about ex-Deputy Tom doing his best thinking while under the influence—some might say his only thinking—but he was dead wrong about my not speaking up for myself. When it came to being charged with a murder I didn't do, I planned to share a word or two with the court, but before I had a chance to unload, ex-Deputy Tom jumped up.

"I been dry going on four weeks, Your Honor," he announced.

"Out of thirty years," the sheriff muttered under his breath but loud enough for spiders in the corners to hear.

"Enough!" thundered Judge Hooker. "The business of my courtroom is justice, not frontier buffoonery. Sheriff Finn, if you're representing this man, sit down and hold your peace until I ask for it."

So Sheriff Huck took up the empty chair beside me and dashed off a note that read, "Did you do it?"

I didn't bother answering. The only one I knew of with anything near a reason for doing away with one of the Britches brothers? He was sitting right beside me.

Next up, a St. Louis lawman marched in the jury. They came single file and seemed to number at least thirty, every one of them held up by a starchy black suit and tie and looking like merchants who knew the exact price of crockery and calico but were kind of sketchy on the cost of justice.

What caught my eye more than the jury was the four spectators standing closest them. There wasn't much mistaking those heads of thick red hair, anvil jaws, and clenched fists. The Britches brothers—Pericles, Pembroke, Paxton, Palmer—had planted themselves just outside the jurors' box. As the jurors filed in, the Britcheses looked every one of them in the eye and ground their teeth.

I was about to rise up and ask the judge if something couldn't be done about such intimidation, when Sheriff Huck saw the direction I was headed and clamped down on my forearm to confide, "That's right where we want them." Against my better judgment, I eased back, wondering what the sheriff had crammed up his sleeve this time.

The way the prosecutor knew his way around that courtroom, even a blindfold wouldn't have slowed him much. A bald man with a broom-sized mustache, he scowled and spoke with a slight stammer that made his every word sound angry.

"A-and where did you find your brother's remains?"

The first witness he'd called was Pericles, oldest brother of the

dead man and sheriff of Split Rock, Illinois. Naturally, he was wearing his spit-polished badge. When he was sworn in to testify, his mitt hid the whole Bible from view. Now he stared at me as if thinking hard about the part of the Bible that says eye for eye, tooth for tooth.

"Down to the basin," Pericles said. "In one of those gondolas, stabbed through the heart."

"W-with this knife?"

The prosecutor crossed to his table and pointed at a bowie knife identical to the one that Sheriff Huck had used to kill me.

"Ask him." Pericles dipped his square chin toward me.

"D-do you have any idea who might have wanted your brother dead?"

"Those two," Pericles said, and he jabbed a thick finger, first at Sheriff Huck, then at me.

"A-and why m-might they have wanted him dead?"

"So's they could win the Olympic tug-of-war without having to go up against us."

"Objection," Sheriff Huck said, standing. "I was looking forward to winning that competition fair and square."

"Balderdash," Judge Hooker said.

"That a legal term?" Sheriff Huck asked.

The judge made a rattling sound in his throat before ordering Sheriff Huck to sit.

"S-so it's your contention," the prosecutor went on, "that the defendant wanted your brother out of the way to eliminate the c-competition in a sporting event. D-doesn't that sound a little farfetched?"

"Not if you knew what a lily-livered fop he worked for."

Everyone turned to see whether Sheriff Huck might object to that, but all he did was yawn and dig out a penknife to clean beneath his nails. That wasn't encouraging. He generally only dug out his nails when he didn't know what to say.

Then it was our turn to cross-examine. Sheriff Huck glided up to the witness chair and said real casual like, "There any particular reason you went looking for your brother at the basin?"

The question upset Pericles Britches more than I would have guessed and he sputtered, "Why . . . 'cause he liked the water."

"Sure it wasn't something else?" Sheriff Huck asked.

"Like what?" Pericles growled, hunkering down.

Whatever the two of them were disagreeing about, it wasn't whether Tully Britches liked water. The sparks passing between them couldn't be explained by something so small. When I sneaked a peek over toward the jurors' box, the other three

Britches brothers were halfway out of their chairs.

"Well I don't know," Sheriff Huck said, turning all sunny. "I was hoping you could tell me."

"He liked the water," Pericles repeated, stubbornly.

"Could he swim?"

"Not with a bowie knife stuck in him."

The next witness was a Mrs. Randolph Thademaker, who was head of the Ladies Auxiliary at the fair and was wearing more white than Sheriff Huck. Her hat, which was as big around as a rain barrel, trailed a snow plume at least three feet long.

"F-five days ago, were you at the fair?" asked the prosecutor.

"Indeed I was, at the Liberal Arts Palace."

"W-what did you see?"

"Two ruffians fighting. One pushed the other into the perfume fountain."

"W-would he be in this courtroom?"

"He would. Over there. The defendant."

She pointed a white parasol at me.

"A-and the other man?"

"He would be the poor unfortunate you asked me to identify at the morgue, Mr. Penrod Britches."

"Did you hear words exchanged during their scuffle?"

"Indeed, but none that I care to repeat."

After which the prosecutor waved for Sheriff Huck to fire away. First off, the sheriff complimented Mrs. Thademaker on her good taste in color, which got a rise out of everyone but the judge, prosecutor, and witness.

Next he asked, "Get many men at the perfume fountain?"

"They are not our most frequent visitors."

"Have any idea what brought Tully Britches around?"

"Perhaps his nose?"

Score one for the lady. The crowd did.

"Had you ever seen him there before?" Sheriff Huck asked, fishing. "I had not."

"Could he have been meeting someone?"

That stirred the courtroom up plenty. The possibility of a tryst and a spurned lover made the room one big ear. The lady's answer stretched the ear even bigger.

"Perhaps. The fountain was a popular spot for lovers."

Right away everyone wanted to gossip about whether Tully and me had come to blows over some hussy. The judge had to go to his gavel.



Then the prosecutor knocked the wind out of me by calling George Chasingbear to the witness chair.

On the way up there, George called out to me, "You're a brave man, Stanley Two-shot."

It was pretty much all downhill from there.

Once sworn in, George told how I'd shown up on the run and he'd given me a bearskin to sleep under. (Actually, it'd been a deer hide.)

"D-did he say why he was on the run?"

"Said he was supposed to be dead," George answered with a shrug.

"B-but he wasn't?"

"Not so's you could tell."

The crowd was elbowing each other and acting as if this was more like it. Judge Hooker stopped them by raising his gavel.

"D-did he say why he was supposed to be dead?"

"Not so's you'd remember."

"A-and you didn't ask?"

"Didn't seem polite. But he did mention putting a knife in somebody who was after him. I heard him talking about it in his sleep. I did the same thing myself once, up to the Little Big Horn."

Could there have been a worse time for George to start reliving past glories? And whatever knife he heard me gassing about in my sleep, it couldn't have been the one that ended up in Tully Britches. When I'd been sleeping beside George, Tully hadn't even been stuck yet, and I was still supposed to be dead. If I'd been talking about a knife, it must have been the one that Sheriff Huck had poured pig's blood on.

On cross-examination, Sheriff Huck sauntered up to the witness chair, ran his tongue over his teeth once or twice, which usually means he's about to spring a good one, and said, "Do you always believe what someone says in their sleep?"

"If they're an Indian," George answered straightaway.

That gave the sheriff another color to wear, namely bluish red, which showed up along his throat and cheeks. When he moved on to pointing out that any talking I'd done in that teepee had happened before Tully Britches had been done in, nobody paid him much mind, especially after the prosecutor popped up to ask George if I'd said I'd already stabbed someone or was planning on stabbing someone. The particulars were kind of wobbly in George's memory.

"Now what?" I said into the sheriff's ear when he returned to our table.

"All shall be revealed," he whispered back. "All shall be revealed."

I'd heard him repeat himself that way before, usually when bluffing.

The last witness called by the prosecutor was a St. Louis constable, who sat straight in the witness chair and with an Irish lilt identified himself as Sergeant Vincent Reilly.

"A-and could you tell the court what brings you here today?"

"That would be me special training from Mr. John Kenneth Ferrier of Scotland Yard, out to the Brit exhibit at the fair. He'd been teaching lawmen a new procedure called fingerprinting, which lets us identify criminals after they've flown the coop, as it were."

That threw a spark into the leaf pile. Everyone in the courtroom looked at everyone else, and raised their eyebrows, and said *what* a dozen or more times, and twisted this way or that to see how I was taking the news. Well I was doing fine, seeing as how I hadn't had anything to do with Tully Britches's death, but I'm bound to say that Sheriff Huck was sagging some and looking a mite peaked, though he might have been playing possum. It's a game he knows.

"H-how does this new procedure work?" the prosecutor asked.

What Sergeant Reilly then described didn't hardly seem possible, but it appears that whenever people touch something with a hand they leave a print behind that can be seen by sprinkling dust on it.

"Y-you mean," the prosecutor said, "that this murder weapon—" and here he made a big show of pointing to the bowie knife on his table "—will contain the fingerprints of whoever held it?"

"Unless he wore gloves or wiped them off."

"A-and what good do these fingerprints do us?"

"Well now, it means we can be comparing the prints on that knife to the prints of a suspect and see if they match. Everybody in the world makes a different fingerprint, you see, and the Brits have developed something called the Henry Classification System that lets you compare two prints to see if they're the same."

"A-and when you find a match?"

"You've found a murderer."

"Y-your Honor," the prosecutor said, "I propose we collect a fingerprint from the accused and compare it to the prints on the knife pulled out of the deceased."

"Now just a dag-blamed minute!" Sheriff Huck objected, jumping up.

I don't think I'd ever seen him jump so fast, not even the time that Rolly Spankum's coon hound had a chaw of his leg.

But Judge Hooker said justice needed to keep up with the times—same as the scoundrels passing through his court did—and ruled in favor of fingerprinting me. So Sergeant Reilly had me dab

all ten of my fingers in ink and roll them on paper. While that was drying, he dusted the knife's handle with a powder and pulled out a magnifying glass to squint through. All the squirming that went on behind us, you might have thought that every pant leg and skirt hem in the place was on fire.

After the sergeant had triple checked everything, he straightened to say, "We have a match."

The silence that followed that news pretty much deafened me. The prosecutor paced back and forth before his table four or five times, wanting to make sure that every eye in the courtroom was on him. If there wasn't an eye on him, it was only because it'd popped out and rolled away after all the revelations.

"Y-your Honor," the prosecutor finally said, "we believe that Stanley Two-shot faked his own death, as has been reported in the local newspapers, to provide himself with an alibi, and then proceeded to murder Penrod "Tully" Britches. H-his motive? Oldest in the world. Your basic love triangle."

After that, the judge's gavel might as well have been a loose plank knocking in the wind. For a good minute or two nobody paid it much mind. Over to the side, the four Britches brothers were headed my way with a rope that had appeared out of nowhere. The end of the rope had a neck-sized loop in it. All that slowed them down was Sheriff Huck climbing atop our table and screaming out, "Hold on now! Hold on!"

Everyone—even the Britcheses—froze before the sight of this man dressed all in white prancing atop a table. After the voices had all died away and the judge had quit banging his gavel, the sheriff continued.

"First off, where's this mysterious woman that my deputy here and the deceased were supposed to have been scrapping over?"

That gave everyone pause, though not for long.

"S-she may show up yet," the prosecutor predicted. "With a knife sticking in her."

"Back to knives, are you?" said Sheriff Huck. "Before we move on to any new knives, I've got me a question about this current one. There any other of these famous fingerprints on it?"

Every head there whipped toward Sergeant Reilly, though none faster than my own.

"Appears to be one," he admitted.

"One that doesn't match Mr. Two-shot?" the Sheriff asked, acting smug as someone who already knows the answer to his own question.

"You'd be right about that."

"So someone else had ahold of that knife too?"

"Oh yes."

"Possibly the murderer?"

"Possibly."

That took enough wind out of everyone's sails for Sheriff Huck to finally get around to presenting my defense.

First off, the sheriff called up Joshua Farthing, a frontiersman left over from the old days, all flowing beard and fringed buckskin, or at least that's how he appeared at first glance. Once sworn in, Joshua turned out to be a peddler dressed up to sell his wares, which were knives. He had a small shop out to the fair, a buffalo skull hanging over the doorway.

"Did you sell a knife to anyone in the room?" Sheriff Huck asked, back to cleaning his nails. "Take your time. Look around."

"Don't need time," the peddler answer. "Sold one to you."

"So you did," Sheriff Huck said, holding up his penknife. "Mighty fine one too. But is there anyone else hereabouts who bought some of your wares?"

"Plenty," the peddler said, and standing up, he visored his eyes with a hand, as if staring out over the vast plains, and pointed at Pericles Britches. "Him."

There was some uneasy throat clearing from the crowd, which only grew as the peddler kept right on pointing and saying, "And him, and him, and him."

He ticked off Pericles's three brothers. Judge Hook had to pretty near bust his gavel after that revelation, and no one paid much attention to Pericles's claims that their knives were all accounted for and they could prove it. As for me, I was remembering how busy Sheriff Huck had been spying on the Britches boys, maybe when they'd bought their knives.

Satisfied with his beginning, Sheriff Huck moved on to calling up our tug-of-war team, starting out with Wattle McFee, who had a hard time planting his bottom on the witness chair—too much bottom, not enough chair. Once squeezed in the chair, Wattle sat with hands on knees, unable to quit sneaking looks at me. The last time he'd seen me I'd been dead. Every time he answered one of the sheriff's questions, at least one of his three chins wobbled, sometimes two, occasionally all three.

"Do you remember the steamer ride down here?" the sheriff asked.

"Yes, sir," Wattle mumbled.

"Do you remember the Britches boys being on the same boat?"

"I think so."

"What do you remember about them?"

"How handsome they was."

The crowd tittered, which made Wattle grin for having said something witty.

"Anything else?" the sheriff asked, gentle like, as if trying to coax a wild horse.

"They sure had themselves a good time."

"How'd they go about doing that?"

"Arm wrestling," Wattle said, not quite sure what the sheriff was driving at. "Some leg wrestling too."

"Ever see them hit each other?"

"Oh, regularly," Wattle said, relieved to be on firmer ground as to the sheriff's wants. "Saw Paxton break a chair over Palmer's head."

"What'd Palmer do about that?"

"Busted a bottle over Paxton's head."

And so on. The fact that the Britches boys loved brawling was well known in our neck of the woods, though news of it did seem to liven up the courtroom. People were itching something fierce to find out what the sheriff was up to, so I wasn't surprised when he dragged everything out for all it was worth.

One by one he called the other members of our team up to the witness chair and repeated the same questions, getting pretty much the same answers, though the Reverend Farley staggered the sheriff backwards by remembering that Penrod hove a hatchet at Paxton.

"Hit anything?" the sheriff asked once he'd regained his balance.

"Barrel of molasses."

"See them throw anything else?"

The reverend scratched his bearded chin a bit before saying, "Other than the time they all ganged up on Pericles and pitched him overboard?"

"Other than that," the sheriff agreed.

"Can't say as I did."

After the Reverend Farley had said his peace, the sheriff stood before the judge, thumbs locked in vest pockets, and cogitated out loud.

"That pretty much sums it up, Your Honor. There doesn't seem to be much doubt who done in Tully Britches."

"And whom might that be?" Judge Hooker said, none too pleased with the grandstanding.

"Why, one of his own brothers with a knife they bought at the fair. Probably accidental, what with the way they were always roughhousing about, but maybe not. Could be that some deep,

dark family secret started it all, something they don't want the public to know anything about."

This last part sounded like a veiled threat, which was Sheriff Huck's favorite sort, and he gazed straight at Pericles Britches while letting it fly.

The Britches boys were all standing by then, nostrils flaring, breaths pounding. One or two of them was pawing the courtroom floor, but in the end Pericles raised a hand to hold them back. That gesture started whispers rolling all over the place.

The prosecutor put a stop to that by calling out, "What about those fingerprints?"

The whispers dried up on the spot. Was I the only one who noticed that the prosecutor had lost his stutter?

"The ones found on the murder weapon."

"That British folderol?" Sheriff Huck guffawed. "Bunch of nonsense, you ask me. Oh, we all got fingers, but the rest of it sounds pretty sketchy. Next thing you know, these same fellas will be wanting us to believe we're descended from apes, the way that Darwin fella claims. Matter of fact, I heard tell it was one of Darwin's cousins who started up all this fingerprint business anyhow."

If there was one thing the sheriff had a talent for, it was painting over the truth. He almost got away with it too; the crowd wasn't too keen on this talk of apes. Even Judge Hooker was snuffling some about it.

Everything changed lickety-split when ex-Deputy Tom climbed up on a chair to have his say. "Hold on now. You might like to hear what I saw the night that Tully Britches passed."

Quick as could be, Judge Hooker whipped ex-Deputy Tom into the witness chair and had him sworn in. The Bible smoked a bit when he took his oath, but I was the only one who noticed.

"T-tell us what you saw that f-fateful night." The prosecutor was sounding like a man who was thinking about running for public office.

"I was dry as a bone," ex-Deputy Tom started out, which was a line I'd heard him spread out many a time before, "and had my eye on Injun Joe there. You might remember he was supposed to be dead himself, just a few days back."

Heads were nodding everywhere to that, letting each other know they hadn't forgotten that tidbit.

"So when I first saw him, I thought I'd come across a ghost. Then I saw him throw down two of them new Dr. Pepper drinks.

Figuring that a ghost wouldn't have that kind of thirst, I guessed that meant he was still among the living, so naturally I took up his trail. He ain't so hard to pick out in a crowd, and pretty soon he led me down to the lake, where all them pointy boats with flowers are tied up . . ."

That would have been the night I passed on eating dog.

"... and whilst he was mooning around there, I noticed Sheriff Finn pecking around in the same general vicinity, and being a curious fella . . ."

"News to me," Sheriff Huck piped up.

The gavel.

"... I sort of slide on over to see what he might be up to."

"W-were he and Mr. Two-shot there together?" asked the prosecutor.

"Not so's I could tell, though they could have been 'cause I lost track of both of them for a short spell. When I found one of them again, it was the sheriff, and he was leaning over a body with a knife poking out of it. That's not the kind of work he usually does himself. Most days, he leaves that kind of thing to his deputies, like Injun Joe there."

By then the crowd was falling all over itself for a look-see at how the sheriff and me were handling these revelations. Without a blink, I'd say. We had the advantage of having heard ex-Deputy Tom's tales before. The buzz behind us just kept on growing though, and Judge Hooker had to lay into his gavel hard enough to knock together an ark.

When he had some quiet, he pounced on ex-Deputy Tom with these words: "And you're just getting around to mentioning all this now?"

"Well," Tom drawled, tugging at his collar, which had suddenly gotten tight, "after such a sight as that, I'm afraid I heard the jug a-calling. But sitting here listening to all this gibber-jabber, it struck me that if you ink up Sheriff Finn's hands, you're liable to find some fingerprints that match the others on that knife."

The prosecutor was all for it, and even Sheriff Huck didn't put up much of a squawk. I was remembering how he always seemed to be wearing white gloves whenever I saw him in the vicinity of a knife. You could hear the clock on the wall hammering away while Sergeant Reilly did his duties.

After a bit, the sergeant straightened to announce, "No match."

That didn't slow ex-Deputy Tom down a bit; quick as a rattler, he struck up a new lie.

"All right, all right. I'd been hoping I wouldn't have to pin all

this on the poor redskin alone, on account of he never does a thing but what the sheriff tells him to . . .”

I felt something rising fast in my throat.

“ . . . but just before the sheriff was leaning over the fella with the knife sticking out of him, I seen Injun Joe jabbing that knife into a shadow. At least at the time, I was hoping it was a shadow, but I can see now that I had my blinders on, 'cause shadows don't usually bleed anywheres near so much.”

I started to stand up as ex-Deputy Tom went on. “What I was really seeing was the knifing of Tully Britches.”

I wasn't the only one standing by then. The whole tribe of Britcheses had joined me. There's no telling what might have happened if the bailiff and Sergeant Reilly and a couple of others from the crowd hadn't tackled them. A chair or two got broken, and a woman in back screamed before fainting, though pretty soon the judge got everyone settled down. By then Judge Hooker was puffing pretty hard, and the jury looked set in stone. Though the judge didn't have the heart to order the Britches boys removed from their own brother's murder trial, he did happen to remember that rope they had brought with them. He ordered the brothers tied into their chairs with it.

“Things aren't looking too good for you, sir,” the judge said to me once everything had settled down. “Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“He's a quiet sort,” Sheriff Huck said when I didn't speak right up.

“Not that quiet,” I called out. “There's a witness or two I'd like to call, Your Honor.”

First off I had the knife peddler come back up front. He was more than pleased to take the witness chair again and clearly state his name, his business, and where it was located. Such publicity was worth its weight in gold to him, so he was a might disappointed when I only had one question for him:

“What kind of knife did you sell Sheriff Finn?”

“Oh, it was one of them bowie knives. He bought it right after that bunch over there—” He pointed at the Britches clan. “—bought theirs. It was the last one I had in stock.” Raising his voice so everyone could hear, he added, “But I've got more ordered. Should be in any day now.”

After the peddler, I called Sheriff Huck himself as a witness. Soon as I said his name, it sounded like the room was full of a flock of pigeons pumping for the rafters. The judge put a stop to that by calling out, “I'd like to hear what he has to say myself.”

"Long as you don't believe any of it," said Pericles Britches from the chair he was tied to.

Judge Hooker offered to gag the Britches—and anyone else—who couldn't keep quiet. After that, if there'd been pins dropping anywhere, you could have heard them.

"Sheriff Huck," I said, once he'd been sworn in, "would you mind explaining to everyone what you asked me to do about three days back?"

"Are you talking about that practical joke we played on the boys?" he said.

So that was how he was going to play it. As usual, there wasn't a bashful bone in his body as he went on to explain what a knee-slapper he thought it'd be if I pretended to be dead. He was the only one laughing though.

"And the knife you poured that pig's blood over, did it look like that one over there?" I pointed to the knife lying on the prosecutor's table.

"Could be," he said. "The old eyes ain't what they used to be."

"Do you remember my bringing it to you after we played our joke?"

"Sort of, maybe."

"So my prints would have been on it from then?"

"If you believe in such foolishness, I suppose so."

"And you were wearing gloves when you handled it, am I right?"

"It's possible. My arthritis has been flaring lately."

Of all the ailments plaguing Sheriff Huck—boils to pleurisy—this was the first time arthritis had reared its head.

"So that would explain why your fingerprints aren't on the knife?"

"Don't prints go right through a glove?" the sheriff asked, all innocent and waiflike.

"He knows they don't," someone announced from the back of the courtroom.

The voice belonged to a stern-looking fella who was smothered in tweed and identified himself as a constable from Scotland Yard.

"Your Honor," the constable said, "if it please the court, I might be able to shed some light on these affairs."

Judge Hooker was all for light. He ran Sheriff Huck out of the witness chair without a thank you and had the Brit sworn in as if he was visiting royalty.

"And what do you have to tell us, sir?" asked the judge.

"I have been offering fingerprinting demonstrations to the public at your World's Fair, and I'm here to report that your Sergeant Reilly isn't the only lawman in this courtroom who took an interest in them."

A murmur rose from the gallery. Judge Hooker quieted everyone with a look, then said, "Go on."

"The sheriff who's trying to blind us," the constable said, leveling a hand at Sheriff Huck's white suit, "he showed up at my demonstrations a couple of times. Chock full of questions, he was. In particular, I recall him wanting to know the effect of gloves on fingerprints."

The way that news swirled up the courtroom left Judge Hooker gasping for breath by the time he was done exercising his gavel. The Britches boys looked about to burn through the ropes holding them down, and the rest of the courtroom was starting to smoke a little too. Once the judge had the floor again, he thanked the constable and ordered Sheriff Huckleberry Finn back into the witness stand.

"Try to remember that you're still under oath," the judge told Sheriff Huck, "and tell us what you have to say for yourself now."

"Well it's like you pointed out earlier, Your Honor, a lawman has to keep abreast of the times, unless he wants to be a laughing-stock."

That was pretty much the last straw for the judge, but disgusted as he was with the answer, he also saw the lay of the land pretty clearly: Getting one up on Sheriff Huck wasn't going to be any easy rowing. Many a man who'd traded barbs with the sheriff has found himself in the same predicament. Taking in the courtroom, the judge saw that his reputation as a jurist was on the line, and much as it galled him, he decided it might be better to hand the witness off to someone else—namely me.

"Mr. Two-shot," the judge said, "do you have any further questions for this witness?"

"A couple."

"Let 'em fly," he advised.

With a nod, I turned to Sheriff Huck and asked, "So what happened to the knife after I turned it over to you?"

"You know," the sheriff said, scratching his chin in thought, "I sort of lost track of it for a while."

"Until it wound up stuck in Tully Britches?" I asked.

Seeing the sheriff's reaction to that question almost made being put on trial for murder worthwhile. He sat there slack jawed and sleepless. His eyes had a slight glaze. But after a few seconds I'd had my fill of his squirming. He'd done me a good turn or two over the years, when he wasn't busy lording it over me, and besides, it looked as though the Britches boys might actually bust loose any second and string him up right there in the courtroom.

I broke everyone's trance by saying, "So now all we need to do

is figure out how that knife got stuck in Tully. For that, I've got a special witness to call. Would Alfred Moore come forward?"

A short, barrel-chested man wearing a straw boater marched to the front of the room, made a small bow to the crowd, tipped his hat to the judge, and once Sheriff Huck got led back to my table, got sworn in.

"Would you tell us what you do for a living, Mr. Moore?"

"Oh, many a thing, many a thing."

"How about three nights ago?"

"Singing in one of those Italian gondolas, down to the Great Basin. The best tips are at night."

"And why would that be?" I asked.

"Oh, the romance, I suppose. The water's all so black, and the palaces around it are lit up like fireworks. And when there's love in the air, the coin purses, they loosen up."

"Is that the only reason they loosen up?" I asked.

"That and the fact that I know how to keep a secret."

"Except when you're under oath," Judge Hooker prompted.

"That's right."

"And the secret?" I said.

Alfred Moore coughed in his hand and started to answer, but he was speaking so softly that the judge interrupted him and asked to start over, louder.

"Well," Alfred Moore said, "at night, most of the lovers I pole around the basin, they're pairs of men who are afraid to be seen with each other in the light of day."

The crowd got powerfully restless with this news. People were either exchanging looks or staring up at the ceiling as if they couldn't bear to look at anyone else. Some were digging fingers in their ears as if they couldn't have heard right. Off in a corner of the room, standing on a chair so that he could take everything in, was the reporter who'd first told me why Tully Britches had probably been in that gondola, for what went on down to the Great Basin at night wasn't so big a surprise as everyone was pretending. I nodded my thanks to him for rounding up Alfred Moore for me, and he nodded back with satisfaction—he was one of the fellas who had to sneak out on those gondolas to have a little time with his boyfriend. But the surprises weren't all mine that afternoon.

Sheriff Huck raised his voice to say clearly, "It's your skeleton, Pericles. I'd say this is about your last chance to keep her in the closet."

When I glanced over toward the Britches boys, I saw them lined up in a row, heads hung low, shoulders slumped, too weak to say much of anything. So the sheriff had known all along what this

was about. He'd either been trying to spare the Britches boys some suffering, or was hoping for something to hang over Pericles Britches's head during future encounters. Knowing the sheriff, it was the latter. Since there was a noose waiting for me, I didn't give Pericles long to answer.

To Alfred Moore I said, "Was Tully Britches one of the men who came there to be with other men?"

"Sure. I wouldn't forget a big tipper like him. Four or five nights running he came boating, always with a different fella."

A scream cut through the courtroom with that. Twisting about, I saw Wattle McFee standing a little to the right of the Britcheses and looking as though he'd just had a layer of skin ripped off him. Between me and Wattle sat Sheriff Huck, slumped down in his chair same as the Britches boys, so maybe I'd been overly harsh on his motives. Maybe, just maybe, he'd been trying to protect someone he felt responsible for, seeing as how he was the reason Wattle had come to St. Loo in the first place.

After Wattle managed to drag down a breath or two, he blubbered, "He said he loved me. And then I saw him down there with another man."

"What happened?" I asked softly.

That's when a change swept over Wattle, kind of like he turned to iron on the spot. His three chins locked into place, and what he said next sounded cold as a wind blowing all the way from a dark tomorrow.

"I hunted up that knife that Sheriff Huck was hiding under his bed and told myself that if I couldn't have Tully Britches all to myself, then nobody else could either. That's how love works, ain't it?"

The last thing that Wattle McFee said, just before they let him swing, stuck with me for weeks onto months and years. In a clear, calm voice, he looked out over the crowd gathered before him and called out, "I ain't alone up here."

Then the trap door dropped away and the timbers sounded ready to crack under his weight—though they didn't—and Wattle paid for breaking the Ten Commandments.

The sheriff wouldn't talk to me for a spell, being outmaneuvered always gave him the sulks, but he perked up some when I pointed out that Judge Hooker was inviting ex-Deputy Tom to stick around St. Louis for a time to atone for lying while under oath. With no one else running against him in the upcoming election, the sheriff liked his odds.

As for the Britches boys, they buried their brother in the family plot back in Split Rock. Woe to the man who made the mistake of speaking out against the memory of Tully Britches. He was liable to find an avalanche of redheads landing on him.

Not too long after winning that fall's election, Sheriff Huck started talking up the next Olympics. He still believed we could be a force in the tug-of-war competition. As for the 1904 Olympics, a team from Milwaukee took home the cup. 🐦

Report Unwanted Telemarketing Calls

We are trying very hard to protect our customers from unscrupulous business practices and encourage you to deal directly with Dell Magazines. Our subscription offices are located at 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855. This return address is printed on every renewal notice or invoice that comes from us.

Please contact Dell Magazines immediately at 1-800-220-7443, or by e-mail at contactus@pennypublications.com to report any questionable calls. Please be sure to give us the date, time, name, and telephone number of the company that called.

DialAmerica, Inc. is the only telephone solicitor authorized by Dell Magazines to sell subscriptions to our titles, and their callers always represent themselves as being from Dial America at the beginning of each call. If you are contacted by any other telemarketer offering you a new or renewal subscription to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, we strongly suggest the following:

- Do not give your credit card information or your checking account information to any solicitor.
- Do not engage in conversation. If you must speak with the caller, be sure to get his or her name, company name, and telephone number. Tell the caller that you deal directly with the publisher and not to call you again. Hang up. If the company calls again after being instructed not to, it is now in violation of FTC regulations.

We also recommend that you sign up with the National Do Not Call Registry. Most telemarketers should not call your number once it has been on the registry for thirty-one days. Register online at <https://telemarketing.donotcall.gov> or call 1-888-382-1222 from the telephone or cell phone number you want to register. Registration is free.

We at *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* guarantee great reading at an excellent price with the very best in customer service. Thank you for your readership!



MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Three Amigos?

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "November Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

PROUD MARY

HARRIET RZETELNY

I noticed the van sitting in a vacant lot at the edge of the river while I was on my way to work Monday morning. I am a social worker at a home care agency in Brooklyn. Our once-and-still-run-down neighborhood is in the slow process of gentrifying, and big things are planned for the riverfront, but they haven't arrived yet and the riverfront is still full of abandoned piers and empty spaces.

It was a large van, actually more like a minibus, and it rose up out of the surrounding litter like a mirage looming up out of the barren desert. Writhing across its side was a bright green dragon with red and yellow flames shooting out of its mouth. In the center of the dragon's belly, painted in somber black, were the words, *Death is a heartache no one can heal*. And under that, in smaller letters: *Pistol Packin' Mama Productions*.

Death is a heartache no one can heal. All morning, between filling out Medicaid applications and other forms for our elderly, disabled clients and refereeing fights with their home attendants, I thought about those words. I certainly know about death first hand: I work with people near the end of their lives, and death is always in the room, sitting between us like an uninvited guest.

Sometime during the late morning I went into the cluttered cubicle laughingly called The Staff Room, kicking away boxes of forms and memos so I could get to the coffee machine. Manny, our building porter, who has the nose of a bloodhound when it comes to neighborhood gossip, was sitting at the cracked Formica table directly under a sign that said, "This Is A Smoke-Free Workplace," inhaling one of his little brown cigarillos.

"Hola, Manny," I said, pouring myself a cup of the way-too-old coffee. Of course there was no milk in the tiny fridge that sat under the coffee machine. Manny reached into his lunch cooler, pulled out an opened pint container of milk, and handed it to me.

"Only for you, Miss Molly, would I share this *leche*, purchased with my own hard-earned money." Manny was a Latino who could be anywhere from fifty to seventy, with the barrel chest of the chronic asthmatic.

I grinned at him. "Hey, Manny, what do you know about the van that suddenly appeared over by the river?"

"The one with the dragon?"

I nodded.

He took another pull at his cigarillo and said, "You know old Mrs. Bauer?"

I nodded again. Mrs. Bauer was one of our clients. She lived with her daughter, Madeline, and Madeline's daughter, Penny. Mrs. Bauer received four hours of home care a day and was considered one of our "difficult" clients, which meant that I was fairly well acquainted with her and Madeline.

"Her older granddaughter is some kind of punk rocker. That's her van. She came East for the funeral of her father. You know, the one who got killed during that bar robbery last week."

"Paul Ryan?"

Manny nodded.

"I didn't know he was Mrs. Bauer's son-in-law." Madeline used the name Bauer, but Penny's last name was Ryan. It was a common enough name, though, and there was no reason for me to put the two together.

"The things you don't know," he shook his head in mock sadness. "And you call yourself a social worker?" When I made a face at him, he went on, "They still haven't caught the guy who done it, have they?"

He was asking this because he knew I had an on-again off-again relationship with Steve Carmaggio, a detective from our local precinct. Since I knew Manny's discretion had as many holes as a colander, I was glad that I could honestly shake my head and say "I don't know any more than you do."

My curiosity piqued, I went back to my cubicle and telephoned the Bauer house. Madeline answered the phone. She had been downsized from her last job and was currently out of work.

"I'm so sorry to hear about . . ." I was starting to say when she cut me off. "Oh, Molly, I'm really glad you called." Her voice sounded as tightly strung as a piano wire. "Can you come over? I think I'm going to be arrested."

"Arrested?" I could hardly believe my ears. "You need a lawyer, not a social worker."

"I have a lawyer. But if they put me in jail, I don't know what I'm going to do about my mother and daughter. Please, just come."

The Bauers lived on the third floor of a four story walkup, a few blocks from the expressway. As I said, our Brooklyn neighborhood is in the slow process of gentrifying. Many of the run-down two and three story buildings, which had been built slapdash following

the post-war industrial boom and were never much to begin with, had now been spruced up with window boxes and fresh coats of paint. They reminded me of aging women who smear on the powder and lipstick—old hens dressed as chickens, my grandmother used to call them.

No one had tried to spruce up the Bauers' block yet, and the Bauers' building looked like the old hen that it was. The hallway inside was dark and smelled of ancient mouse droppings.

The current home care worker, Divinia Perez, was just leaving as I was coming in. She had the round, warm, toffy-colored face of her Central American ancestors. Usually it relaxed into a smile when she saw me, but today she merely shook her head and started down the stairs.

I walked through the dark, crowded apartment to the kitchen, where Madeline and her mother were sitting at a faded gray table with chrome legs. They were drinking tea. Madeline's mother, Louise, was propped in a wheelchair. One side of her face sagged like a fallen cake. One hand lay curled on her lap in its post-stroke rigidity, and she held her teacup with the other.

She peered at me out of hard, bitter eyes. "Oh, it's you, from the agency," she said in her slurred voice. "That woman is useless. She won't even wash the windows when I tell her to."

"Mama, you remember the nurse told us Divinia was here just to take care of you and do some light housekeeping." Madeline's voice had a note of pleading. Her mother gave her a savage look; in the face of it, Madeline seemed to shrink and grow smaller. I liked Madeline, but she was one of those victim women who simply collapse in the presence of a stronger personality. With Louise Bauer as a mother, she'd never had a chance.

"When I was young, we really had to work," Louise Bauer declared. "Not like it is today. Now they expect to get paid to do nothing. I brought up my daughter alone. I worked all day in a factory. If the boss told me to wash the windows, I would have washed the windows if I wanted to keep my job."

Madeline rolled her eyes. They were deeply set and still hauntingly lovely. Madeline bore the remains of what once must have been exquisite beauty like some half-forgotten memory. But her whole body looked worn out, as if the downward forces in her life were stronger than any energy she could put forth to counter them.

Getting up, she put the dishes into the sink. "It's time for your programs," she said. Mrs. Bauer released the catch with her good hand and wheeled herself out of the room, with Madeline trailing along behind. I heard a TV set go on and then the sounds of a door

opening and closing. In a few minutes Madeline was back with her daughter Penny.

The child was so skinny it was painful to look at her. She had her mother's deep-set eyes, but there was no beauty in them. They were sunken and corpselike, and they kept darting back to her mother, as if she were continually checking her for signs of impending disaster.

"Why don't you watch some TV with Grandma, and I'll bring you in some cookies and milk," Madeline said.

"No, thank you," she answered in the piping voice of a very young bird. "I'm not hungry."

"You know what the doctor told you." Two little lines appeared in the skin between Madeline's eyes. "If you don't eat, he's going to have to put you back in the hospital."

"I ate something before I left school," Penny said quickly, but it was obvious that she was lying.

Madeline ran her fingers through her hair. "She's fifteen years old," she said to me. I still found that hard to believe; she looked ten. "I can't be hanging on her every minute trying to get her to eat."

"Don't worry, Mom. I'll eat something later." Penny shot her mother another anxious look and scurried out of the room.

Madeline closed the kitchen door and then sank into a chair. "Dysfunctional Family 101," she said. A corner of her mouth twitched. "We're perfect candidates for Dr. Phil." Comments like that were one of the reasons why I liked her.

"Madeline, what's going on?"

"The police think the robbery at the bar was just a cover-up for Paul's murder."

"Who would have wanted to murder Paul?" Paul Ryan had owned a bar called The Crawfish that was a neighborhood hang-out. Although I didn't know him well, having only been into The Crawfish a few times, I knew he had a reputation as a womanizer. He had never put the make on me, however; he liked them way younger and a lot hotter than my thirty-something self.

Madeline shrugged. "Apparently me, according to the police."

"Why do they think you did it?"

"Who knows? He stopped support payments for Penny?" It was a question, not a statement, as if the machinations of the police mentality were beyond her understanding.

I shook my head. "The police need more than that; they need evidence that puts you on the scene with the weapon in your hand, so to speak."

"Well, I was there, so maybe that's what they've got."

"You were there?"

Her eyes flashed again briefly. "He was such a bastard, Molly. He said he wouldn't give me my money unless I begged him for it. I didn't want to go, but Mama said she'd go if I didn't. So I went. But I didn't kill him." She lifted her shoulders and let them drop. "If they do arrest me though, I'll need twenty-four-hour service to take care of my mother. She needs help getting out of bed during the night to go to the bathroom. And Penny . . ."

The door was flung open and a young, impossibly blond woman burst into the room. She looked to be in her early twenties, and was garishly made up with bright, neon purple lipstick and green eye shadow. Her red sequined top was cut so low, I could see the tiny gun tattooed between her breasts. If this wasn't Pistol Packin' Mama, I would eat that fire-breathing dragon.

"This is my older daughter, Roxanne . . ."

"Roxy," the girl corrected her. "Roxanne is so, like, *medieval*."

"Roxy and her, uh, boyfriend, Fredo. They came in from Seattle for the funeral."

Behind her, almost obscured by her luster, was a good-looking young Latino, dressed entirely in black leather with an assortment of chains dangling from his belt. I nodded at him, and he scowled back at me.

Roxy took me in from the top of my short brown hair, through my dressed-down sweater and khaki pants, right to the bottom of the low-heeled walking shoes I wear to work. Next to her I felt as drab and colorless as the concrete sidewalks and decaying buildings I could see from the kitchen window. "She doesn't look like the fuzz."

"My name is Molly Lewin," I said primly. "I'm a social worker with your grandmother's home care agency."

"A social worker, huh," Fredo growled, as if he smelled something bad in the room. "Come to put old grandma away in a nursing home?"

"Shut up, Fredo," Roxy commanded.

"She's here to get some additional help for my mother and Penny if I am arrested."

Roxy turned and put her hands on her mother's shoulders. "That's ridiculous, Mom. They can't possibly arrest you."

Madeline shrugged, as if it was out of her hands. "My lawyer says they can." She looked at me. "What can you do, Molly?"

"It will take a few days to get your mother certified for additional hours." Mrs. Bauer was on Medicaid, which meant nothing was easy. "And I can't officially include Penny in the request. We can only provide care for your mother."

"Penny can come stay with me for a while," Roxy declared. "I'm her sister."

"I don't know . . ." Madeline glanced hesitantly at Fredo.

"Don't worry about him." Roxy shrugged off her mother's concern, as if Fredo and his dangling chains were no more dangerous than a cockroach.

"I'd better get back to the office and get the paperwork started," I said, getting up. "Just in case." I put on my jacket and added, "Let me know what happens."

No one answered me. Roxy had opened the refrigerator door and was peering inside. Fredo, who seemed to have only one expression, was scowling at her back. And Madeline was staring down at her hands as if they were Exhibit One in her own murder trial.

I got back to the office and called Steve.

"Carmaggio," he said when he picked up the phone. Brusque, impersonal—his cop's voice.

"Lewin," I said in the same way.

"Who? Oh, Molly." His voice got softer, warmer as he said my name. When I asked him to meet me after work at Vinny's, a local joint, he added, "Just what I was hoping you'd say."

I started on the paperwork that would get Mrs. Bauer certified for additional hours, if necessary, which took a good chunk of the rest of the afternoon. Since it was early December, it was almost dark by the time I left the office at five, and the street lamps were on. Posted on several of them was an advertisement for *Pistol Packin' Mama*, who was appearing later that night at a local club called The Crooked Peg. A smudgy photocopy of Roxy, one hip thrust out aggressively, challenged me to come by and see her.

It had been overcast all day, and even the Christmas lights blinking in the store windows couldn't cut through the murky gloom. The inside of Vinny's was almost as dim as the street outside and smelled of garlic and old beer. Steve was sitting at the bar, his big shoulders and sandy-haired head were hunched over a half-empty mug. He turned toward me as I slid onto the stool next to him and gave me a grin, and my heart simply melted away into my chest; it was just like coming home to a glowing fire after a long, cold day. It was moments like this that sustained me during the bad times, when he would disappear into his beer, or his work, or his head, or wherever.

He leaned over and kissed me lightly on the lips. Then he signaled Sal, the bartender, for a white wine—my drink of choice. Steve picked it up when it came, and we made our way to a table in the back. At that early time, we were the only people in the dining room.

"Steve," I said, after Sal had brought over the menus. "I have a client, Madeline Bauer, who thinks she's going to be arrested in the Paul Ryan murder. Is she? Because if so, I'm gonna have to get additional home care hours for her mother."

"What do you know about it?"

"Just like a cop," I said in a teasing voice. "Never give an answer when you can ask a question instead."

"You gonna tell me what you know about it, or what?" Actually, his assumption that I knew something worth telling was a high compliment. He had learned that in my capacity as a social worker, people often told me things that they wouldn't necessarily tell the cops, and I'd been able to give him some valuable help with some of his past cases.

"I don't really know anything more than you do," I answered. "I just spoke to Madeline briefly this morning. She's got her hands full. The mother from hell, one anorexic daughter, another daughter who calls herself Pistol Packin' Mama and has a gun tattooed between her breasts."

"You know anything about Madeline's recent relationship with the D.O.A.?"

"I didn't even know they had been married. She's never talked about him."

His lips tightened for a minute. Then he said, "The D.A. thinks there's enough for an indictment."

"And you don't?"

He shrugged. "It's not up to me."

Sal came over to take our order—a veal Parmesan hero with extra cheese for Steve and a spinach salad for me. I sat quietly as Steve mulled something over. Finally he said, "The loo tells me I gotta move on from this." By *loo* I knew he meant Lieutenant Cavanaugh, his commanding officer. "We've got the serial killer, the Vasquez triple homicide, and two detectives out on sick leave. But I been doing this a long time, and something doesn't feel right to me here."

I waited as he chewed on it some more. "We've got evidence that places the ex-wife at the scene, we've got a motive—the D.O.A. was way behind in his child support, and several witnesses tell us she was pretty angry at him. She could'a come there wanting her money, things get a little out of hand, and she ends up whacking him over the head with the baseball bat he keeps behind the bar—no fingerprints, so it could be her as well as anyone. It's a good case from the D.A.'s point of view."

"But you don't like it?"

He shook his head. "Unfortunately, no one looks any better, so

"we gotta go with what we have." He leaned in closer, lowered his voice, and said, "Can you help me out on this, Molly? Nose around a little, see what you can find out. I'd hate to see her go down for this if she didn't do it."

"And you don't think she did it?"

He shrugged. "Unless we come up with someone else that the D.A. likes better . . ." He let the sentence hang.

I wanted him to come home with me, but he told me he was going to his youngest daughter's band concert later that night; he'd been divorced for many years, but he tried to stay involved with his kids as much as he could. He suggested that I come along, but I decided on the spur of the moment to take in Roxy's show. Which meant that I had some time to kill. I went back to the office with all good intentions of knocking back a big chunk of the paperwork that sat in an ever-present pile on my desk. Instead, I leaned back in my chair and thought about Roxy's father.

Paul Ryan had been a hunk. Tall, good looking, with dark hair that curled tightly around his head, and a pair of the most magnetic blue eyes I'd ever seen. Even though I knew he wasn't interested in me, those eyes, resting on my face, could make me believe I was the only woman in his life. God knows what those eyes could do to a woman he really wanted. The bar was always full of sweet young things and the men who inevitably flocked around them. Any one of those men, or a few of those sweet young things for that matter, could have whacked him in a fit of jealousy.

Problem was, I didn't know him or the crowd well enough to have any thoughts about which one it might be. Besides, knowing the way Steve worked, I'm sure he had covered that angle. I sighed, leaned forward and rested my elbows on the desk. Which put me eye to eye with the pile of paperwork. Since I could find no more excuses, I buckled down and got to work. Before I knew it, it was time to leave.

The Crooked Peg was located in an old warehouse a few blocks away from the river. Not too long ago, I wouldn't have felt safe walking around the neighborhood that late at night because all the well-intentioned people were safely at home, and only the drug dealers and muggers were out and about. But the young, hip singles moving into the neighborhood were night creatures; they streamed through the streets, cell phones stuck to their ears, like some electronically plugged-in nomadic tribe.

A couple of very young teenaged girls were lounging around outside the metal door of the building. They were dressed in standard goth fashion—greasy black hair, black leather, dead-white makeup—refugees from a castle in Transylvania. Their little button noses

and still-pudgy faces were pierced by an assortment of silver rings, crosses, and studs. They were both sucking greedily on cigarettes, as if they were determined to develop lung cancer by the time they were twenty. As I went by, I caught the glance of one of them, and she looked at me with surprise and a little defiance; I realized I was old enough to be her mother.

As I was about to open the door, a skinhead came out of the shadows. Dressed in the requisite black, with tattoos covering every visible spot on his body, including his shaved skull, he put himself right in my face. "You wanna get in; you gotta make a donation." He gave me an aggressively leering look, which peeled the clothes right off my body, and said, "Twenty bucks."

I stood my ground and handed him a ten. He took it and I went in. The space inside was vast and very dimly lit, except for an area dotted with tiny tables around a small stage at the other end of the room. The crowd looked to be anywhere from their early teens to their late thirties and were mostly male. I sat down at a small table and was soon joined by a young guy dressed in denim who, I gathered, was trying to pick me up. He bought me a beer, and he talked to me nonstop. But I never learned his name, nor much about him because the canned music blasting through the speakers was so loud I could hardly hear a word he said.

After a while, Fredo and a couple of look-alikes appeared on the stage and began setting up equipment. Fredo and one of them picked up guitars that were propped against the back wall. The other one sat down behind the drums. Someone turned off the canned music. The abrupt absence of sound was so total, I felt like I had been dropped into the depths of the ocean. Then Fredo and friends started playing, and Roxy walked onto the stage.

She didn't walk, exactly. She suddenly appeared, like a force of nature. She was dressed in a tight purple blouse so low cut it almost met the waistband of her tiny, neon pink skirt. With her spiky blond hair, that outfit, and the pistol tattooed on her breast, she was the height of punk allure. And she was the show—the band behind her might as well not have been there. She cajoled, she berated, she seduced, she thrust herself right into the heart and soul of her audience and had them screaming for more. She was her father's daughter, big time.

They wouldn't let her stop, and I was as entranced as they were. Usually, I don't like punk rock, but something about her performance thrilled me. It was as if Roxy, in her total takeover of the audience, was speaking for her mother and all the other victim women who'd learned to keep their mouths shut and not ask anyone for anything. I would have liked to stay for another set, but I

knew I had to get to work the next morning. So as the lights went on, I got up and left. The young guy who'd been trying to pick me up didn't even notice me leaving.

The next day, mid morning, I got a call from Divinia. "I'm on my cell phone out in the hall," she said breathlessly. Mrs. Bauer wouldn't let her talk on the phone during work hours. "Miss Madeline, she's been arrested."

"I'll be over as soon as I can," I said.

She must have heard my footsteps coming up the stairs because she met me outside in the hall with a flood of words. "It happened this morning, just before I got here. I don't know what I'm going to do with Mrs. Bauer. And the little girl, well, she didn't go to school this morning. You gotta see her."

Mrs. Bauer was sitting in her chair with a spoon in her good hand with which she was eating a bowl of cereal. She looked up and said angrily in her slurred voice, "I always told her that no good would come from that marriage." She made a noise that sounded like "Phht" and slammed her spoon into the bowl.

I had a momentary image of that hand with a baseball bat in it . . . Nah, couldn't be, although she was pretty mobile in that wheelchair.

"Who's supposed to take care of me when Divinia leaves?" She made that noise again and said contemptuously, "Penny is as useless as her mother."

Divinia pulled me into a back bedroom. Penny was cowering in a corner of the bed with a look of sheer terror on her face. I knelt down so as to make eye contact with her and said gently, "Penny, your mom wants me to make sure you're okay."

No response.

Idiot! I thought to myself. She's so not okay. I looked up at Divinia, the mother of three, seeking inspiration, as children are not my forte. But Divinia, while she might have known what to do with her own children, was standing back with her arms folded across her chest, looking to me, the professional, for my expert advice.

"I'm going to have to call Children's Services," I said to her.

That did it. Penny sprang to her knees and howled like a feral creature, "No! Don't call them! Call the police and tell them to take me away. I did it! I killed him. Not her."

Whoa! What the hell was going on here? "What are you talking about, Penny?" I asked

She wrapped her arms around her skinny chest and rocked back and forth for a minute as tears collected around her eyes. Finally, in a low voice, she said: "I followed her over there. He was yelling

at her, calling her a . . . a . . . leech and a bloodsucker." She rocked harder, the words bubbling like escaping steam through the tears that were now running down her face. "I waited till she left, and then I picked up the baseball bat and . . . and . . . did it."

"Why did you do it?"

She gave me a look of pure anguish, threw herself face down onto the bed and began beating her fists against the blanket. "I did it! I did it! I did it!"

I was afraid that frail little body would snap in half. I sat down next to her and gently began to rub her back. "It's okay, Penny," I murmured softly. "It's okay."

I tried to lift her onto my lap, but I wasn't the one from whom she wanted comfort. She wrenched herself away from me and started sobbing again.

"It's okay, Penny," I murmured again, and then added because I didn't know what else to say, "I'll call the police."

I got Steve on my cell phone and told him what happened. "I don't really believe she murdered him," I added. "But I think she needs her mother so desperately, she's willing to go to jail for her if it will keep Madeline safe."

"This I need?" Steve said, as if appealing to the capricious God of Cops who was giving him a particularly hard time. "Give me a nice, clean drug whack any day. Dealers offing dealers. That's what I like. This domestic stuff drives me crazy."

"How about getting her a psych eval, Steve?"

He sighed. "Yeah, I already thought of that. I'll see you soon."

Later, after Steve and his partner, Bobby Ortiz, had been and gone, taking Penny with them, I decided to pay a visit to Roxy. Somebody had to look out for that little girl.

It was a cold and cloudless day, and the sun shining directly overhead made the pieces of broken glass and used crack vials that were lying all over the vacant lot glitter as though they were on fire. I picked my way through it all and knocked on the door. "Roxy! Are you in there?"

"If you want to come in, you'd better open the door," I heard her say from inside. "I can't."

I slid the door open and went in.

The inside of the van was a techie's delight—amps and speakers and sound equipment as far as the eye could see. Roxy was standing just to the side of a thick metal ring, which was screwed into the wall of the van, slightly above her shoulder. But it was a different Roxy, a slender, delicate Roxy, her face scrubbed clean of the layers of punk-style makeup I had always seen it covered in. She was wearing jeans and a thin black sweater. Her wrists were

tightly handcuffed together and she was holding them under her chin, almost in an attitude of prayer, like the bas relief of the Virgin Mary that hung on the wall of Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows Church a few blocks away. The handcuffs were attached by a very short chain to the ring, making it impossible for her to sit, or even move more than a couple of inches.

"Would you get me a muffin from the bag on the floor?" she said when she saw me. "I'm famished."

I stared at her, shocked and bewildered. Did Madeline know just how dysfunctional her family really was? Roxy must have seen my expression because a corner of her mouth went up and she said, "Oh, this is just something Fredo and I do."

"Roxy, this goes beyond fun and games. It's still dangerous around here. Anyone could walk in and really hurt you, or kill you. Don't you realize that?"

"There's no safe place in this world," she declared, as if this should have been obvious, even to a dimwit like myself. "If someone wants to do something to you badly enough, they'll find a way to do it."

What was she talking about? What kinds of things did Fredo do to her?

"Besides," she went on with a sigh. "I get so tired always having to be responsible for everything—the music, the PR, the bookings, the band, life—*everything*. When I'm like this," she gestured with her cuffed hands, "anything that happens is on someone else's head. It's, like, *so relaxing*."

I heard a noise behind me. I whirled around and there was Fredo. He shot me a look of pure malice, pulled a knife out of his pocket, flipped it open, and came toward me. "What are you doing here?" he growled.

I stepped back, and then realized I couldn't go anywhere since he was between me and the door.

"Oh, Fredo, stop being such a Neanderthal," Roxy said sharply. Her words stopped him in his track. She turned her head in my direction and repeated the question: "Why *are* you here?"

"Can he put that thing away?" I asked nervously.

"Fredo, lose the damned knife!" she commanded. He flipped the knife closed and reluctantly put it back into his pocket. "So?" she asked, shifting her shoulders to ease the strain on them. "What do you want?"

My eyes kept darting back and forth between the two of them. Whatever was going on here was way beyond me. Better just stick to my agenda. "Did you know your mother was arrested?" I asked.

"Oh God!" she wailed. "Can't she do *anything* right?" She turned

her head toward Fredo. "Can you *please* get me a muffin?"

Fredo looked around, his eyes finally resting on a greasy paper bag that was lying on the floor.

"I asked her for one," Roxy gestured with her chin in my direction, "but she's too freaked out."

Fredo reached over to the bag, pulled out a muffin, and began to tear off pieces, which he then fed to Roxy as if he was performing a sacred act.

"Penny was supposed to call me if Madeline got arrested," she said after she had wolfed down most of the muffin. "But did she?" Her voice was a scathing indictment of Penny's failures.

"Penny's in a bad way," I said.

"When isn't Penny in a bad way?" she snapped. "Why do I always have to clean up after everyone?"

"Roxy," I said, "it's a little more serious than that. Penny confessed to the murder of your father this morning."

"What?" she exploded.

"She's already in custody. She's with a police psychiatrist right now."

"Oh God!" She lifted her eyes up to the heavens and clasped her cuffed hands more tightly to her chest. If you ignored the handcuffs and the chain, she could have been the Virgin Mother praying for the deliverance of her Son. "Fredo, unlock this thing. I gotta get down there and get her out."

"Why does it always have to be you?" he growled. "Why don't you let them all drown in their own shit?"

She ignored him and went on as if delivering a list of grievances: "Madeline would get herself arrested: That's her karma. Penny does one dumb thing after another, like starving herself and playing the martyr. And grandma eats them all up and spits them out for breakfast. What is it with that family?" She shook her wrists and the handcuffs rattled. "Come on, Fredo," she said sharply. "I gotta get down to the police station before some idiot psychiatrist traumatizes my poor little sister any more than she is already."

Reluctantly, Fredo unclipped the handcuffs from the ring, took a key ring out of his pocket, and unlocked them. She rubbed her wrists a few times and rotated her shoulders.

"How will you get her out?" I asked, realizing with a jolt that I didn't question for a minute Roxy's ability to accomplish anything she set her mind to do.

She shrugged. "I'll have to tell them what really happened."

I stared at her. "You know what really happened?"

"I should. I killed the bastard myself." She took a deep breath and let it out. "It was the only way to stop him."

That stopped me. I sank down into an old plastic chair after throwing the coils of cable that covered it onto the floor.

Roxy peered at me anxiously, then said to Fredo, "Get her some water. She looks like she's gonna faint, for God's sake."

"Get it yourself!" Fredo growled. But he could no more disobey her than he could voluntarily stop breathing. There was a bottle of spring water standing on a pile of amps. He began routing around a small metal cabinet for, I could only assume, a cup or glass.

"I'm okay," I said. "I don't need any water. I'm . . . I just can't wrap my mind around this." Was she telling the truth? "Why did you do it?"

She picked up a black leather jacket that was hanging on the back of another chair and thrust her arms into it. Then she looked at me for a moment, as if deciding whether or not she should tell me about it. "He was a pig!" she finally said. "He started coming onto me as soon as I started developing tits. 'You should learn about love from someone who loves you,' is what he used to say to me." For a moment she stood stock still and her eyes filled with pain. "He was my *father*, for God's sake!" Then she shrugged, as if it was just plain silly to expect anything more from her father than she did from anyone else. "So I got out of there fast and went as far as I could. I wasn't worried about Penny because she wasn't hot enough for him, if you know what I mean."

I nodded.

"A couple of months ago he came out West to see me perform. Afterward, he came backstage and started on me all over again." Her lip curled again in total disgust. "You can imagine what I said about that." She took a deep breath and let it out. "Then he got real cute and told me he'd start on Penny if I didn't let him 'do it to me.' He was past the 'making love' stage. He just wanted to 'do it to me.'"

"Oh God!" The whole thing made me sick to my stomach.

"And that stupid Madeline!" she went on, her voice full of contempt. "What a wimp! I knew she couldn't protect Penny if Paul really set his sights on her. So what else could I do?"

"You could have gone to the police, or the courts, or ACS, or something," I said in my best social worker voice.

"Yeah, right," she said. "And they would have helped how?"

I couldn't really think of an answer to that one. So I changed the subject. "Everyone thinks you came East for the funeral, but you actually came before then."

"Yeah," she shrugged. "I wanted to talk to the bastard. But it was nobody else's business. So I borrowed a friend's ID and took a flight to New York."

"So what happened?"

Fredo, who'd been leaning against the wall chewing on his lip, suddenly came to life. "Don't tell her anything!" he barked at Roxy.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Use your head for once. I'm going to confess, for God's sake. The whole thing is going to come out anyway." She rubbed her wrists a few times and said: "I think we should loosen up on those handcuffs a little next time. My damn wrists are burning."

"So, Roxy, what happened?" I needed to get away from that image of her in those handcuffs that I still found so disturbing.

She opened a jar of something and rubbed it into her short blond hair, spiking it up. Then she contemplated me for a moment and said, "People tell you things, huh?"

I nodded. "I'm a social worker."

She shook her head. "I don't mean you, the social worker. I wouldn't tell most social workers the time of day. I mean you, personally. People tell you things."

"I guess so."

"Maybe you can help Penny out after this is all over." Two lines appeared on her forehead. For a moment she looked like her mother. "God knows that little ghouel needs someone to talk to."

"I'll try, Roxy."

She nodded, and having taken care of another responsibility, she was ready to resume her story. "So I waited until the last customer left the bar, and I went in. First I pleaded with him. But when I saw that that wasn't going to work, I picked up the baseball bat he always keeps behind the bar . . ." She stopped, letting me fill in the picture for myself. "He was too astonished to defend himself. Afterward, I took the cash out of the till."

Her eyes turned inward, and a shudder went through her entire body. "All I ever wanted was for him to love me like a real father. But no-o-o." The pain, cutting through again like a sudden gush of blood, was so palpable I could almost touch it. "Is that so much to ask?" she said mournfully.

I shook my head. "No, Roxy, it isn't. Unfortunately . . ."

"Yeah, I know." She rifled through a huge handbag that was on another chair and took out a plastic toiletry case. On it was a picture of a little boy and a little girl, sweetly kissing. She gazed at it for a few seconds. "Madeline gave this to me once, a long time ago," she said in a dreamy voice. "She always did believe in the tooth fairy." She took out a tube of lipstick and held it in her hand as she contemplated the picture. Then she straightened her shoulders and said in her normal voice: "I really gotta ditch this thing. It is so not relevant."



"What do you think will happen to Roxy?" I asked later on that evening. Steve and I were lying in the bed in my little studio apartment just holding each other. We had tried to make love, but both our heads had been someplace else—I couldn't stop thinking about Roxy. I knew she had gone to The Crawfish intending to kill her father—the fake ID, the secrecy, all pointed to it. And she would have gotten away with it, if she hadn't had to confess to get Madeline out of jail. But if she hadn't mentioned the fake ID to Steve, I certainly wouldn't. "A prosecutor will say that she didn't go to the police after her father tried to blackmail her."

"So what else is new?" He snorted. "Actually, she did something better. She cleverly taped her father's attempted seduction and his threat to start on the sister if she wouldn't go along. Apparently, he came backstage after her performance and as soon as she got the gist of what he was saying, she surreptitiously switched on one of the recorders they use for the performances. Any jury hears that tape, it's over." I could feel the anger, like an electric current, rippling through his body. "After I heard it, I was ready to go right over to the M.E.'s office and punch that SOB out myself. And he's already dead."

Trust Roxy to have thought of everything.

Steve sat up, swung his feet over the side of the bed, and said: "I think the D.A. is going to let her plead down. A good lawyer could probably get her off altogether, and I hope she gets the best one around."

Tears were welling up behind my eyes, and I knew my heart was breaking for her. *Death is a heartache no one can heal.* When had she painted that message on the side of her van? Before or after she killed him?

I put my hand on Steve's arm and said, "Don't go away, Steve."

"I was just going to make some coffee," he said. Then he shot me one of his totally infectious grins and said, "So, ditch the coffee. Shall we go back to Plan A?"

He lay down on the bed again and in a few minutes, nothing else mattered except him and me. 🐦

Note to Our Readers:

If you have difficulty finding Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at:
Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.



UNSOLVED

LOGIC PUZZLE BY ROBERT V. KESLING



For some time, police suspected the La Paloma Club was a major drug outlet in the Bay area. Yet despite their surveillance, they could connect no consistent visitor to the club with a potential courier.

The big break came when a woman, who identified herself only as "Hazel," furtively approached Captain Arlen. "Captain," she said, "sooner or later you police will break up the La Paloma Club's cocaine deal."

"We have hope," declared Arlen guardedly.

"Well, I want out of it. How much would it be worth to know everyone involved?"

"Name a figure."

"Ten thousand. Unmarked bills."

The police captain quickly calculated. The savings in departmental man-hours would be worth it. "Agreed," he told her, "if your information proves out."

"Oh, it will. You see, my husband and I are one pair of the deliverers. The system works like this: Ten couples are involved. To avoid detection, one couple goes to the La Paloma each morning between the hours of 8 and noon, Monday through Friday. A different couple goes there each afternoon between the hours of 2 and 6, Monday through Friday. To add more possible confusion, each couple leaves the package with their coats and hats with the hat check girl, then hangs around like a regular customer."

"Sounds clever. Now, exactly who are these couriers?"

Hazel hesitated. "I don't want you to be able to testify that I told you outright. But I'll give you enough clues . . .

1. Of the ten couples, no husband and wife have the same first initial. So Abe isn't married to Amy, Bart to Belle, and so forth.
2. Abe, Bart, and Chaz come different days; they include Mr. Malone, the man who delivers at 10 A.M., and one of the two men who come Monday. They are married to Dolly, Eva, and myself—Hazel.
3. Gus, Hank, and Joe come different days; they include Mr. O'Toole (who isn't married to Belle), the man who delivers at 4 P.M., and one of the two who come Friday.

4. Mr. Karnak, Mr. Pitts, and Mr. Quinn come different days; they include Dan, the man who delivers at 9 A.M., and one of the two who come Wednesday.
5. Mr. Null, Mr. Rankin, and Mr. Scholl come different days; they include Felix, the man who delivers at 6 P.M., and one of the two who come Monday. These three are married to Celia, Flor, and Ida.
6. Eli's delivery is one hour earlier than Mr. Pitt's and one hour later than one of the men who come Tuesday; no two of them come the same day.
7. Joe's delivery time is one hour earlier than Mr. Tarloff's and one hour later than that of one of the men who deliver Thursday; no two of them come the same day.
8. The 2 P.M. delivery is made the day after Mr. Rankin's and the day before Ike's. The 8 A.M. delivery is made the day after Mr. Laboda's and the day before Abe's.
9. Monday deliveries are four hours apart. Friday deliveries are six hours apart. And Wednesday deliveries are eight hours apart, neither of which involves Dolly or Flo.
10. The couples delivering Thursday do not include Mr. Quinn, Belle, or June.
11. Mr. Null does not deliver at 8 A.M. Mr. Sholl does not deliver at 3 P.M.
12. Chaz is not Mr. Laboda (who is not married to Dolly).
13. Mr. O'Toole makes his delivery at a later hour than Mr. Karnak; neither is married to Ginny. Mr. Rankin makes his delivery one hour later than Mr. Null.
14. Felix makes his delivery the day before Mr. Quinn. Hank (who is not married to Amy) makes his delivery the day before my husband.

Hazel's information proved sufficient to work out the names and schedules of the ten couples delivering drugs to the La Paloma Club. Enough hard evidence was then gathered to convict all involved—except Hazel, who was given probation for her cooperation.

*What were the scheduled times of delivery for the ten couples?
Who was Hazel's husband?*

The answer will appear in next month's issue.

RANSOM

R. T. LAWTON

They came out of the darkness like ghosts from my recent past. The old hill tribesman appeared in front, while the young Chechen brave kept off to one side, partially in shadow. Flickering light from my campfire reflected off pieces of bright silver embedded into the stock of the young warrior's flint gun, a weapon from the Turkic lands that lay far to the south. As the brave stood quietly in the background, his face seemed grim and unfriendly, even though his musket was not aimed directly at me.

Since my Nogay helper and I had recently left most of the Wild Country behind us, I had not thought it necessary to carry any weapon in our camp so near the river that served as a border in these lands. But then I generally thought of weapons as the last resource of an angry or frightened man. I much preferred to use the brain my creator gave me to solve any problems in this violent world of ours. For the present, it seemed in my best interest to sit very still and wait for these two intruders to make their intentions known.

The old man advanced to the edge of my Persian carpet, which had been stretched out on the ground halfway between the fire and my tent. It was here that I sat cross-legged with a steaming cup of Assam tea held in my right hand, a hand now stalled in mid motion. The elder Chechen lowered himself onto the carpet and sat facing me.

"You are the Armenian?" he inquired in broken Russian.

I speculated he knew the answer before he asked. Not much went on in this land below the Terek River that the hill tribes didn't quickly discuss with others residing in the steppes and foothills beneath the snow-peaked Caucasus. From the pro-Russian Chechens on the south bank, to the Ingush in the west, to the wandering Nogay from the Golden Horde, and even the Abreks—those Chechen brigands roaming the last of the Wild Country near the Blue Mist Gorge—news traveled fast.

I lowered my teacup.

"I am the one you mention," was my reply.

"At sunrise you will cross the river and pass through the Cossack cordon?" he asked.

"That is my intention."

A few hours prior, I had instructed my Nogay helper to pitch our camp at least a pistol shot's distance from the south edge of the Terek. Night was not a good time to make the crossing. Cossack guards at the cordon on the north bank, with their constant watch for raiding Abreks; were quick to fire their muskets at any movement in the water or even into the brush on our side of the river if they thought some Chechen might be in hiding. An imprudent man could easily be shot by accident.

"Did you wish something of me?" I continued.

"For the last month, you have traded your goods in several villages to the south," said the old man. "Now we wish you to make a different trade for us in the morning on the other side." He paused. "We will pay in silver Turkish coins for your assistance."

Ah. Money is the language of merchants, and it transcends all ethnic boundaries. I now had a chance to make one last profit on my trading venture into the land of the Chechens. It only remained to see what items these two of the Sunni Muslim faith had for trade, and what they wanted in return.

"I may be interested in your offer. What would you have me do?"

The old man motioned the young brave to approach closer to where we sat.

"This is Kasimov."

I gazed up at the lean warrior. In true Chechen tradition, his head had been shaved bare, and his trimmed mustache and cropped beard were dyed red. He wore a ragged Circassian coat over a white cloth shirt, while his blue trousers were held at the waist with a wide leather belt and tied at the knees with thongs. Boots of soft moroccan leather covered his feet. As he came closer, I saw even his fingernails had been dyed a deep red.

Kasimov muttered to the old man in guttural Chechen but spoke too fast for me to understand much of what he said. The old man then translated into Russian as he gestured toward the young brave.

"This man is the last of three brothers. A year ago, his older brother was killed during one of the Russian army campaigns south of the Terek. Last night, he lost his younger brother somewhere over there on the north bank. The Cossacks now hold that body for ransom."

"They wish Kasimov to redeem the corpse of his brother for a price?"

"They do, and we want you to negotiate with those infidels on our behalf. In the past, we have heard from others, you've been fair in all your dealings with us *Nokhchi*," he said, using the name the Chechens did when referring to themselves as a people. "Therefore we will trust you in this matter."

He then named an amount as my commission. The price seemed fair enough. I didn't quibble, perhaps because I felt uneasy about this buying and selling of the dead. True, in the past, I often traded in antiquities scavenged by others from ancient burial tombs in various lands, but never had I purchased a body, either living or dead. With this macabre business I was now being drawn into, sleep would not come easily tonight.

In the waiting silence, I contemplated my options. Already, on these dark nights when strong winds howled around our tent and storm-swept clouds scudded across the face of a pale moon, I found myself plagued with dreams of the Russian staff captain I'd sent down the road to his death on one of my earlier trading ventures. And the young face of a murderous Abrek I'd abandoned to wolves at the Blue Mist Gorge a few weeks back often slipped into my inner vision when I least expected. I wished to decline this generous offer of a commission from these two late-night visitors, but at the same time, my instinct told me how unwise it would be for me to refuse their request if I wished to continue trading safely in the south.

My tea had gone cold in the cup.

"We three will cross together in the morning," I finally said, "and I will do my best with the Cossacks."

With a few words of thanks, the elder Chechen rose to leave. He and Kasimov disappeared into the night in much the same manner as they had come. I heard no rustle of bush, no breaking of twig. Only a heavy stillness remained in the dark, broken by random whispers of lapping water from the nearby Terek and the faint buzz of a few brazen mosquitoes in this season of early fall. The ground beneath my bed seemed extra hard this night.

At sunrise, I placed my Nogay helper in charge of our camp and instructed him to wait for my return. He regarded me with his usual expressionless face and asked no questions. After he began his daily tasks, I walked down to the river crossing.

Kasimov and the elder Chechen were waiting for my arrival. They'd made arrangements with a man from one of the pro-Russian villages for a boat to take us across the water. We soon cast off into the current. As the villager strained at his long wooden pole, I stood precariously up front in the narrow skiff so

any Cossacks on guard could see who was coming.

When we'd gone partway, I hailed the opposite bank and was fortunate enough to find a graybeard of the Old Believer Cossacks who knew me from previous trading ventures. He stood at the water's edge in his worn black boots, baggy trousers, and long-sleeved white shirt trimmed with red thread in Cossack designs. A musket was slung on one shoulder and a soft cap sat jauntily on top of his long gray hair, as if his many years carried no great weight.

"Garaska, how are you?" I called.

"I see you come in the company of Abreks," he replied, then continued, "Just two nights ago, we had a shooting match with your Sunni Muslim friends there and came away even."

"You had casualties?" If so, it could make my negotiations more difficult.

"We did."

I cursed beneath my breath. The old man seated behind me whispered to Kasimov, but once again I couldn't catch all the words spoken in Chechen. Obviously, something more had happened than they'd told me the night before.

"But," continued Garaska, as we drew closer to the north bank, "the only loss to our side was a Russian sergeant, one of those Muscovy troops that are quartered in our village by order of the tsar. Of course, our officers stamp their boots and roar for revenge on those marauding red devils from the south, but us common Cossacks deem this particular exchange to be no great loss to our ranks. Good riddance, we say, but we don't let the officers overhear such statements."

As the prow of our skiff beached on the gray sand, I leaped for shore, hoping to keep my balance. Garaska reached out his large calloused hand to steady me as I stepped ankle deep into a brittle carpet of red and orange and yellow fallen leaves that littered the bank. A light wind swirled more of these bright colors down from overhanging tree limbs. The time of cold nights was not far off. I needed to finish my business here quickly and move on before winter blocked my passage home.

"We expected you and your pack train to cross one of these days soon, Armenian," said Garaska, "but now it seems you come with a different sort of animal in tow."

I glanced back at Kasimov and the old man. Neither reacted as if they had understood the words of our host. I hoped for the best.

"They approached me to negotiate for the dead Chechen. I'm told your side is holding his body for ransom."

"In that case, Armenian, you are doubly welcome. With the ransom

money in hand; our lads will drink vodka tonight. Come, I'll show you our prize."

The villager stayed with his skiff, while the two Chechens and I followed Garaska up the bank to a watchtower built out of rough logs. From the advantage of that height, any Cossack on guard duty could see movement for some distance up and down the river. Meanwhile, on the ground, several Cossacks lounged around in the barely warm sunshine, while their horses grazed in a small pasture nearby. Only one horse stood saddled and ready, reins tied to a support log on the watchtower.

In the shade of a low-growing tree, Garaska led us to a body sprawled in the grass. He swished away a couple of flies as he pointed out a small round hole just above the right eye of the corpse.

"I marked him well so his owner will surely know him in the future. He'll not get lost on our side of the river again."

"You're the one who shot him?"

"And an excellent shot it was. Two nights ago, I went off by myself to the east and hid in bushes farther down the Terek than we usually go in evening time. Soon a dead tree limb floating against the current and away from our north bank caused me to suspect something was not right with this piece of wood. I set up my musket rest and quietly cocked the hammer. As the moon came out from behind gray clouds, its light glistened on the top of a shaved head moving in the water on our side of the log. Crossing myself in the manner of a true Old Believer, I said an Our Father and then whistled loud, like I was calling my hunting dog. When that shaved head turned in my direction, I pulled the trigger. There was a flash and my night vision was blinded for a moment. My dead Abrek soon floated up onto a sandbar, and we got him the next morning."

Several times during this recitation, I surreptitiously observed Kasimov's reactions to see how he was taking the sight of his dead brother, and maybe find out how much he understood of Garaska's conversation. Kasimov gazed only once at his brother's body, then nodded to the old man beside him. Afterward, he stood in silent contempt for the Cossacks who gathered around to get looks at the young hill tribesman as they discussed the similarities of facial features between him and the corpse. A couple of minutes later, the elder Chechen took off his own Circassian coat and draped it over the dead man's face and upper body.

I felt the tension on both sides and only hoped our undeclared truce would hold long enough for me to settle our business.

"How much is the ransom?" I inquired.

Garaska combed his fingers through his beard and frowned.

"If it was up to me, I'd set you a fair price. But these days, the officers have to be involved with every transaction. I'll have to send for one of them."

He bellowed up to the guard in the tower.

"Yermack, your horse is saddled. Ride to the village and get one of our officers. And stay away from any Russians while you're there."

Garaska turned back to me. "Those Muscovy soldiers don't understand our ways and wouldn't approve of our little business, especially now with one of their own recently dead."

Yermack hurried down the ladder, mounted his horse, and rode up the dirt road headed west.

I turned to the eastern sun and raised my palm, calculating the time of day. It was early yet.

"We'll have some time to waste now, Armenian," said Garaska at my elbow. "Tell me about your venture into the Wild Country while we wait."

But my curiosity had been aroused about the happenings here.

"My friend, the trip was nothing beyond the simple exchange of trade goods for silver coins or merchandise I could sell elsewhere. Nothing of interest to you. But then, it seems all the excitement was on your end, with the shootings."

Garaska shrugged his massive shoulders.

"Like I said before, I saw the Abrek and I shot him. What's more to tell? Now the lads say I have to stand them to a pail of vodka in celebration of my good fortune."

"Did more of the Chechens cross the river?"

"No more came my way."

"How did the Russian sergeant get killed?"

"As I understand it, Daddy Eroshka took him boar hunting in the morning. When they got tired, the two of them came over to the watchtower. The Russian said there was no use of himself staying around the village because there was nothing to do there that day."

"So he spent the night here at the watchtower?"

"He was talking with the lads about how he wanted to sit in our usual ambush site that night so he could shoot himself a wild Chechen to brag about back at regiment. None of us wanted to sit out all night, so we let him go alone. Looks like the Abreks shot him instead of the other way around."

"Then more raiders had crossed the river?"

Garaska scratched his ear. "I didn't see any more than my swimmer, but later that night, I did hear two shots between me and this

watchtower. Mazeppa was the one who saw other Chechens shoot the Russian sergeant in the back of the head. Then Mazeppa fired at the fleeing Abreks with his musket and missed. Those sneaky devils got away from us in the dark. At daybreak, we mounted several patrols on this side of the river but never found them. That's all I know about it."

"Where's the Russian's body?"

"Some of the lads threw his carcass onto the bed of an oxcart and drove him back to the village. We only hope the officers didn't decide to bury him in our cemetery."

With more than a day gone past, there probably wasn't much to see at the scene of the killing, still I had a strong curiosity about circumstances surrounding this death. Something else as yet unseen seemed to be moving in the air about me. Why hadn't the elder Chechen told me about the dead Russian when he engaged my services? Parts of the story were being deliberately left out by one side or the other. Or maybe both.

"Garaska, could you show me where the sergeant waited in ambush?"

"Sure, I was the first one to arrive that night after Mazeppa fired his musket. And I returned there again later in the morning, shortly after they loaded the Russian onto a cart. It's only a short walk from here."

"Good. Wait for me a minute while I speak with the two Chechens, then we'll be on our way."

I walked over to the shade tree where the Abrek's body lay and drew Kasimov and the elder off a short distance where none could overhear us. My questions were directed to the elder, but my eyes were focused on Kasimov.

"This death of the Russian sergeant could cause problems with our negotiations for your brother. The price may become very high. I need to know what happened in this place, so tell me the truth."

The elder translated into Chechen. Kasimov then stared at me for several minutes before he nodded his head in agreement.

I asked my questions.

"How many raiders were on this side of the Terek that night?"

Kasimov held up three fingers.

"Did one of you shoot a man in the dark?"

Kasimov shook his head no. Then he spoke rapidly.

The elder turned to me and said, "He and the two others were returning from a scouting mission a short distance beyond here. They looked for a safe crossing to the east, away from the watchtower. His younger brother volunteered to swim across first.

When the Cossack laying in ambush fired his musket, Kasimov and the other brave moved farther down river and crossed without trouble. Later, they heard two more shots during the night, but none were fired by them or at them."

I studied the face of the young Abrek until the silence grew between us. Finally, he muttered words in an angry tone and turned away from me.

"*Tsu lyattor*," repeated the old man. "He swears by earth it is so."

I said nothing.

"One more thing," continued the elder Chechen. "Kasimov has borrowed all the wealth he could for this ransom. If negotiations go badly, he won't be able to take his brother home with him for burial."

The consequences of failure on my part were clear, but I also knew I would find out no more from these two. I pondered the situation as I rejoined Garaska. Maybe the Cossacks could give me the information I sought. It was only a question of finding the right person . . . and maybe having enough time.

After a short walk east along the dirt road, Garaska changed course toward the river. He led me through well-trampled grass and broken bushes to a dead tree that had long ago lost most of its branches. It stood like a giant white scarecrow, with four arms and no head or hands. A large gaping hole in the trunk appeared about where the scarecrow's belly would have been.

"That old dead tree's our landmark for the ambush site. Its smooth white wood shows up easily, even at night."

He pointed off to the left, where I noticed a packed indentation in brown dirt near the edge of the riverbank. An upright screen of woven tan-colored reeds, heavily inset by cut branches with withered leaves, concealed the hiding place from anyone on the south side.

Garaska then indicated a patch of discolored earth near the indentation.

"This is where the Russian fell."

I looked around at the torn-up grass. Many boots had trod this soil, obliterating all individual tracks until there was no telling one man's footsteps from another's. No distinguishing marks were left anywhere to show that Chechens had or had not been here. Or even to prove that any other particular individual had stood on this ground. For now, only those who had already admitted to being here could be placed at the scene. Perhaps this was a good time to speak with the old hunter who had brought the Russian sergeant to the watchtower.

"Where can I find Daddy Eroshka this time of day?"

"He'll be in before noon. We usually give him a little bread and cheese, maybe a bottle of *chikhir*. He loves his fresh wine. In return, he brings us pheasants or other wild game so we can eat well on duty."

Walking back to the watchtower, I balanced in my mind the sworn oath of a young hill tribesman against what I'd heard so far from the Cossacks on watch. Maybe none of them was lying, but it is possible for a person to omit certain facts while still telling the truth. I needed some type of lever to help me probe deeper into this matter.

In our absence, Daddy Eroshka had arrived at the foot of the tower with a brace of pheasants and a cloth bag full of rabbits slung over his shoulder. When he caught sight of me, he dropped the wild game and strode over in three giant steps. Wrapping his muscular arms around my middle, he picked me up off the ground and bellowed, "Kunak, you've come back after all."

I was not one given to the display of open emotions, but I also couldn't help liking this old white-bearded Cossack who called me his comrade. In our past dealings, he had wheedled several bottles of wine and a couple of pails of vodka out of my purse strings. In return, he entertained me with tales of the past, when Cossacks were real men, as he put it. But more importantly, he knew everyone in the village and was always up on local gossip. His information had once helped me solve a mystery involving the murder of a Russian orderly and a stolen Karbadian horse. I had no doubt that if I could lay my hands on a bottle, he'd once again be a source of local knowledge.

"You must stay with me, Armenian," he said as he put me back on my feet. "We will drink to your health while you tell me about my old friends in the Wild Country."

"I have business that keeps me here at the tower," was my reply.

"Ah yes, our dead Chechen. That was some excitement."

"Your friends on watch will soon have their own money for vodka," I said, "but there are also coins in *my* pocket if you know where a couple of bottles of something are for just us."

"Of course, my friend, give me but one hand's breadth of sun movement across the sky, and I can refresh our souls."

He held out his palm. I tossed him a few small coins and he disappeared. In a matter of minutes, Eroshka returned with a small pail in one hand and a metal cup in the other. I soon found the cup was for me, while he guzzled the majority of the *chikhir* straight from the pail.

When he paused for breath, I caught him with a question.

"Garaska says you took the Russian sergeant hunting on the day of his death."

"True, although the sergeant wasn't really interested in shooting anything. He just had a sudden desire to get away from our little community."

"He was bored there?"

"Let's say he had a sweetheart in the village to amuse him most of the time, but that day was not a good one for him to stay around."

"Why not?"

Daddy Eroshka chuckled in his deep, gravely voice.

"Because her husband had gotten leave from the cordon and came home for three days. It put a real damper on the Russian's love life, so he asked me to take him elsewhere for some excitement."

I waited while Eroshka took his next draught and finally lowered the pail. He wiped his lips with the back of one grimy hand. Dark red drops of spilled wine stained his long white beard.

"Did the husband know of this?" I asked.

"Our small community keeps few secrets for long, Armenian. I was told later that when the husband heard the rumors going round, he and his wife had quite a row. The whole village listened in, but most of our citizens already knew of the affair, and we were only waiting for the husband to find out."

"Then what?"

"The husband took his musket and horse and returned to the cordon."

I had now been given a possible motive for murder as opposed to an act of war by the enemy. In which case, I also had a potential suspect for murder, if that's what it was.

"Who is the husband?"

By now, Daddy had approached the bottom of the pail. A sly grin crossed his face.

"Mazeppa," he replied.

"But Mazeppa was the one who saw the Abreks shoot the Russian, and then he shot his musket at the Abreks when they fled."

"So they say," said Daddy, as his eyelids closed halfway. "So they say."

The old hunter would soon be snoring on a bed of fallen leaves. I hurried to ask one last question.

"Where is Mazeppa now?"

"After all the excitement was over, he returned to the village to finish his leave."

I thought about all I'd learned so far. Yes, Mazeppa made a good suspect, but how to prove he'd committed murder? Muscovy soldiers quartered in the village were not well liked by the Cossacks, so I doubted that any of the village men would point a finger directly at their friend Mazeppa and accuse him of any killing of a Russian sergeant. Besides, there was the mention of *two* gunshots that still needed to be clarified.

Garaska was engaged in conversation with Yermack near the watchtower when I left Daddy-Eroshka to his nap on the ground. The two Cossacks finished talking as I walked over. Yermack quickly climbed back up the ladder to resume his guard duties.

"The officer will be coming soon," said Garaska, "then we can conclude our business with the Chechens, and they can be on their way."

"Fine," I replied, "but let me ask you something in the meantime."

Garaska shook his lion-mane head of gray hair.

"You need to slow down, Armenian, and enjoy life as it's meant to be lived. Drink to your heart's content, dance until exhaustion, and love a beautiful woman. Death catches up with all of us soon enough. Forget all these useless questions you ask."

"This one may be important," I said.

He laughed.

"How close together," I inquired, "were the two shots you heard?"

Garaska held up his hand and looked at his splayed fingers.

"There was the first one, and then the second came within the count of five, if a person happened to be counting on his fingers. At least, that's how I remember it."

"Enough time for a man to reload his musket and fire a second shot?"

"No."

"Then he had a second gun."

"Mazeppa? No, he had only his usual musket in hand when I got there. Besides, why would he . . . ?" Garaska paused.

You already know the answer to that question, I thought.

"What did the two of you do after you arrived at the usual ambush site?"

"We stayed with the corpse until daybreak, then Mazeppa and I went together to the tower. Our officer sent a couple of other fellows to guard the body, while the rest of us went out on patrol. By the time Mazeppa and I got back from retrieving my Abrek off the sandbar in the river, the lads had already carted off the Russian. Nobody found an extra gun."

That left me with two main questions and no answer. Had my

late-night visitors from the Wild Country misled me for some reason of their own? Or had Mazeppa found himself a good hiding place for a second firearm? He could have thrown it in the river, but the river would have ruined or even carried away the weapon, and weapons were valuable in this troubled land. *If* Mazeppa had been the one to shoot the Russian, then I needed to look for a second gun. And I thought I knew of one more place to search.

"Garaska, take a walk with me."

He frowned.

"I need to be at the watchtower when the officer arrives. You should be here too, Armenian. You're the negotiator."

"We'll return in time. I promise."

Once I got Garaska onto the east road, I increased my pace to give him less time to worry about his officer. When we came to the well-used trail leading down to the river, I turned off the road.

"You could have found this place on your own," said Garaska. "Why do you need me along?"

"You'll see soon enough," was my reply.

In a couple more minutes, I stopped in front of the old dead tree used as a landmark for the Cossacks' ambush site. It was a clear shot from here to where the Russian sergeant had been killed.

Garaska stepped up beside me. "Now what?"

"You're taller than I, and your arms are longer." I indicated the large hole in the trunk of the hollow tree. "Reach inside and feel around. Tell me what you find."

He did as he was told, and I could tell by the changing expression on his face the exact moment when his fingers touched the object I was searching for in this place.

"It's something of metal," he exclaimed.

"Pull it out," I ordered.

As Garaska withdrew his arm and then his hand, the long barrel of an ancient Cossack musket appeared. We'd found the missing gun.

"Do you recognize it?" I asked.

He spoke slowly, as if reluctant. "It looks like the old one Mazeppa kept above the door inside his hut. He inherited it from his father." Then Garaska grew silent before giving me a second and third answer. "Well, maybe I recognize it. I'm not sure. This musket could belong to anybody . . . or to nobody."

I believed his first answer. For any utterances after that, he was merely trying to protect his fellow villager against all consequences. No doubt, Garaska had suspected Mazeppa from the first and maybe even considered it to be Mazeppa's right to avenge the honor of his marriage. So be it. That was not my concern. Now it

was time to get back to the watchtower.

A grim-faced officer greeted our return. He berated Garaska for his absence until I threw the musket on the ground between them. Several Cossacks stopped what they were doing and moved closer to see what would happen next.

"We found the gun that shot the Russian sergeant," I said.

The officer glanced at Garaska, who nodded and dropped his gaze to the ground. From murmurings of the gathered Cossacks, I could tell that others also recognized this ancient musket and knew its owner.

"No matter who killed the Russian," said the officer, "our ransom price remains high. These damn Abreks must pay for raiding on our side of the Terek."

As we began to haggle over the amount of blood money required, I observed one of the Cossacks mount his horse and slip quietly away in the direction of the village. The officer ignored the man's departure, but I was sure that Mazeppa would soon be warned of our discovery.

For two hours, we argued and orated. Finally, the officer set his final price and refused to go any lower. I excused myself and went to the two Chechens, who had been listening from a short distance away. To the elder, I named the price.

"It is steep," he said, "but we will pay."

He spoke to Kasimov in their guttural Chechen. The young brave counted out several silver coins and handed them to me. I in turn gave the coins to the officer.

"Tell the Abreks to take their dead and go," growled the officer, as he waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "And tell them to stay on the other side of the river from now on."

I attempted to help the Chechens load the body of the dead brother into their skiff, but Kasimov would accept assistance from no one. Just before the skiff pushed off into the river, the elder Chechen pressed a small leather bag into my hand. I heard the muffled clink of silver coins.

"Your commission," he said, "and our thanks."

"Forget any payment," I replied. "This is not money I could spend in comfort after knowing the circumstances that brought it."

"Kasimov is a proud man," the elder one explained. "Your actions here today have allowed him to recover a member of his family for proper burial. Consider this payment as a debt of honor."

For the first time in my life, I held earned money that I had no wish to keep.

"Armenian," called the elder Chechen from out on the river as they poled away, "I'll send the skiff back for you in a few minutes. May Allah watch over you in your travels."

The blessing I could readily accept, but tarnished silver gained from buying a corpse was a different thing altogether. The leather bag burned my fingertips.

Since there would be several minutes before the skiff returned, I walked back up the bank and over to where Daddy Eroshka slumbered peacefully on the ground. When no one else was watching, I carefully slipped the bag of coins into a pocket in Daddy's ragged coat. Even if he later managed to realize this silver had resulted from the aftermath of a violent death, he would have no qualms about spending tainted money on refreshment for the living.

As I stood alone on the north bank of the Terek waiting for the skiff to take me back across the river, I pondered on all that had happened here in just two days' time.

Kasimov had paid a high price in silver to regain the corpse of his dead brother. Most of this blood money would soon reside in the Cossack treasury, but for Kasimov, it was a matter of family honor.

For his own part, Mazeppa had paid in violence to ransom the honor of his deceitful marriage. In the end, he too would pay a high price. By now, Mazeppa was surely headed south into the Wild Country before the Muscovy troops could hunt him down on their side of the river.

But most of all, the Russian sergeant had paid the highest price, his life, for betraying the trust of a fellow soldier, even if Russians and Cossacks were uneasy allies on this southern frontier.

And I, well, I hoped I was ransoming my own soul by slipping my commission of Turkish silver into the pocket of a drunk. I sometimes wished I could sleep as well as that old, whitebeard Cossack hunter did. For in his own mind, I knew he considered himself to live as innocent as a newborn child in this violent land along the Terek.

If only money could buy me some of that peace of mind. 🐦

REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

Last fall, James Roday was faced with the kind of choice that only comes along in Hollywood, and even there only once in a blue (and full) moon: He could either be a werewolf or a TV star.

Perhaps surprisingly, Roday almost chose fur and fangs over fame and fortune.

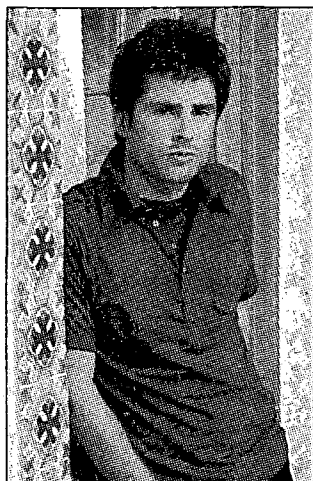
"Being a werewolf would have been a dream come true," he says. "But at the end of the day, you know when your ship is coming in, and you get on it."

And so it is that the young actor set sail on the S.S. *Psych*.

Roday stars in the newly launched USA Network series as an irresponsible, fun-loving slacker who finally finds his true calling . . . as a phony psychic detective. (Though he solves crimes using his super-keen powers of observation, Roday's character has more luck getting people to believe him if he pretends the clues come to him from the spirit realm.) By committing to the show, Roday missed out on his chance to costar in a werewolves-at-war thriller called *Skinwalkers*—which the lifelong horror fan cowrote with buddies Todd Harthan and James DeMonaco.

But even though *Skinwalkers* was in production around the same time as the *Psych* pilot, Roday managed to squeeze in a (non-canine) cameo in the movie (which opens nationwide December 1). And when *Psych*'s first season was shooting in Vancouver, Roday somehow found time to pen a Halloween episode for the show while simultaneously prepping for his upcoming directorial debut (a low-budget horror-comedy called *Gravy*).

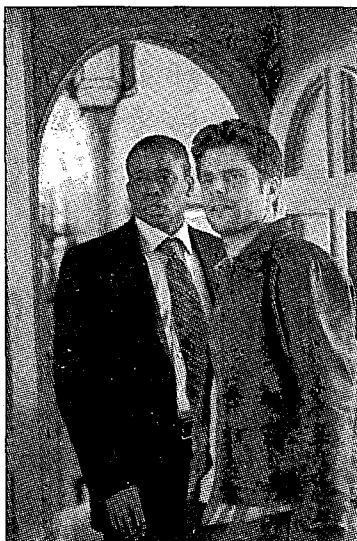
Clearly, the happy-go-lucky sleuth Roday plays may be a ne'er-do-well, but the actor himself is a ne'er-stop-working.



James Roday. Photo by Kwaku Alston, courtesy of USA Network

"I'm a workaholic to a fault," he admits. "I didn't have any brothers or sisters, so I was always wholly responsible for occupying my time. And at a pretty young age, I said, 'Hey, I don't ever want to be bored. What can I do to keep my imagination stimulated?' And then as I got older, it changed from playing entire imaginary basketball games in my room to doing things that are more productive and work-oriented. It became an eyes-on-the-prize thing."

That focus and drive served him well when he first met with Steve Franks, the showrunner behind *Psych*. Franks knew he needed a lead with comedy chops: He was creating a companion piece for the USA



Dulé Hill and James Roday in *Psych*. Photo by Jeff Weddell, courtesy of USA Network

hit *Monk*, a series in which scoring laughs is just as important as cracking mysteries. But Franks wanted someone who could be serious too—at least about doing whatever it takes to be successful.

"In the auditioning process, there were a lot of actors who were like, 'I don't read [for a part].' And I was like, 'Enjoy your next job—whatever it is. Because I want someone here who really wants to do this,'" Franks says. "Of the actors who did read, hardly anybody got it. And then James came in, and it was like, 'Oh, my God! This is the guy!' He had the right self-deprecating sense of humor. He understood the comedy, and he and I were instantly in sync."

Whether b.s.ing gullible cops or bickering with his stick-in-the-mud sidekick (*The West Wing*'s Dulé Hill), Roday certainly seems at ease with *Psych*'s goofy humor. Yet the actors he admires most include Val Kilmer, Sam Rockwell, Sean Penn, and Daniel Day-Lewis—none of them kooky cut-ups of the Will Ferrell/Jim Carrey variety.

"I never anticipated becoming a comedic actor, but I keep getting asked to do comedy," Roday says. "Coming out of school, I was expecting a completely different path."

The path Roday thought he was on lead to The Great White Way. After studying acting at New York University, he won a series of roles in off-Broadway productions. (He even took his stage name from one: "Roday" is a character from Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. The actor's real name is James Rodriguez, but

he had to pick something else because another performer was already using the same name.)

Though Roday says he once had “a huge chip on [his] shoulder” about working in Hollywood, that chip was gradually chipped away after he started landing movie and TV gigs.

“When you train on the East Coast, Hollywood is the dance you don’t want to go to,” he says. “You think doing theater is ‘real,’ and



A pack of werewolves (in the daytime) from *Skinwalkers*, which Roday cowrote. Photo by Steve Wilkie, © Lions Gate Entertainment

that’s what acting is all about. But then if you’re lucky enough to get a taste of the other side, you start thinking, ‘What’s so terrible about this? Why can’t we do everything?’ And that’s the bottom line for me. I want to do everything.”

Though he’s only thirty, Roday’s off to a good start when it comes to

doing everything. He’s appeared in indie dramas (Wim Wenders’s *Don’t Come Knocking*), cult comedies (*Beerfest*), and big-budget wannabe-blockbusters (*Showtime*, *The Dukes of Hazzard*). His TV work has been just as diverse—though not particularly successful. He’s been a regular on three short-lived series: cop show *Ryan Caulfield: Year One*, hottie-lawyers drama *First Years*, and romantic dramedy (and Alicia Silverstone vehicle) *Miss Match*.

“After all that, I wasn’t really jonesing to do television anymore,” Roday acknowledges. “I was ready for a break. But the script for [the *Psych* pilot] was just so smart and funny. There was maybe half a second where I thought, ‘Here we go again.’ But that was it. You don’t read enough good scripts to let one pass you by.”

Which is why Roday ended up with his own television show instead of a coat of fur and an unholy hunger for human flesh. And so far he’s enjoying himself, even though the grueling TV production grind can make even lycanthropy look laid back by comparison.

“I’m holding up. It’s just about learning what your limits are physically and how much sleep you need at night,” Roday says stochically, once again sounding very much unlike the devil-may-care man-child he plays on *Psych*. “Really, I welcome the challenge and the responsibility. I’ve been dabbling in TV for a while without truly carrying the load [as a series lead]. So I think it was time to step up and give it a try.”



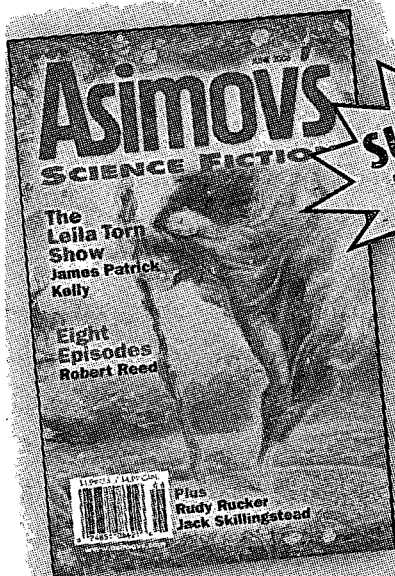
DON'T MISS AN ISSUE!

Subscribe today and have every intriguing issue of entertaining science fiction delivered direct to your door!

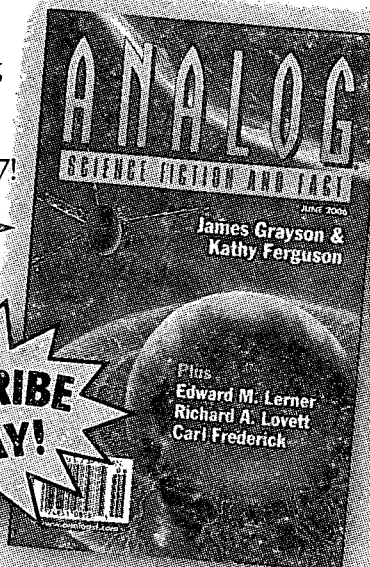
Analog Science Fiction and Fact

An unbeatable combination of stimulating fiction stories, provocative editorials, and fascinating articles, all solidly rooted in science fact. 1 year (12 issues*), just \$32.97!

Visit www.analogsf.com →



SUBSCRIBE TODAY!



Asimov's Science Fiction

Novellas and short stories from the leading science fiction and fantasy writers. Plus, candid, no-holds-barred book reviews and guest editorials. 1 year (12 issues*), just \$32.97!

← Visit www.asimovs.com

To order by charge card, call
TOLL-FREE: 1-800-220-7443 (8am - 7pm EST)

or mail your name, address, order, and payment to:

Dell Magazines Direct
6 Prowitt St., Suite S • Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside U.S.A.: Add \$10 per year, per subscription for shipping and handling. All orders must be paid in U.S. funds

*We publish double issues twice a year which count as four issues toward your subscription. Expires 12/31/07

CEASED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

56C-NSFSL

MY MOTHER, MY DAUGHTER, ME

It isn't just me, is it? Surely other mothers of little girls experience this uncanny sensation when time overlaps and folds back, when they feel they've lived this incident before in another body or seen it through different eyes?

For instance, when I tell five-year-old Beth, "You're not going out in shorts in the middle of winter!" and she glares at me a long level moment before she stalks off to change, then I know—I mean I really *know*—exactly what she's feeling. More than that, I *am* her, whirling away from my mother and biting back the rebellious words that would get me a spanking.

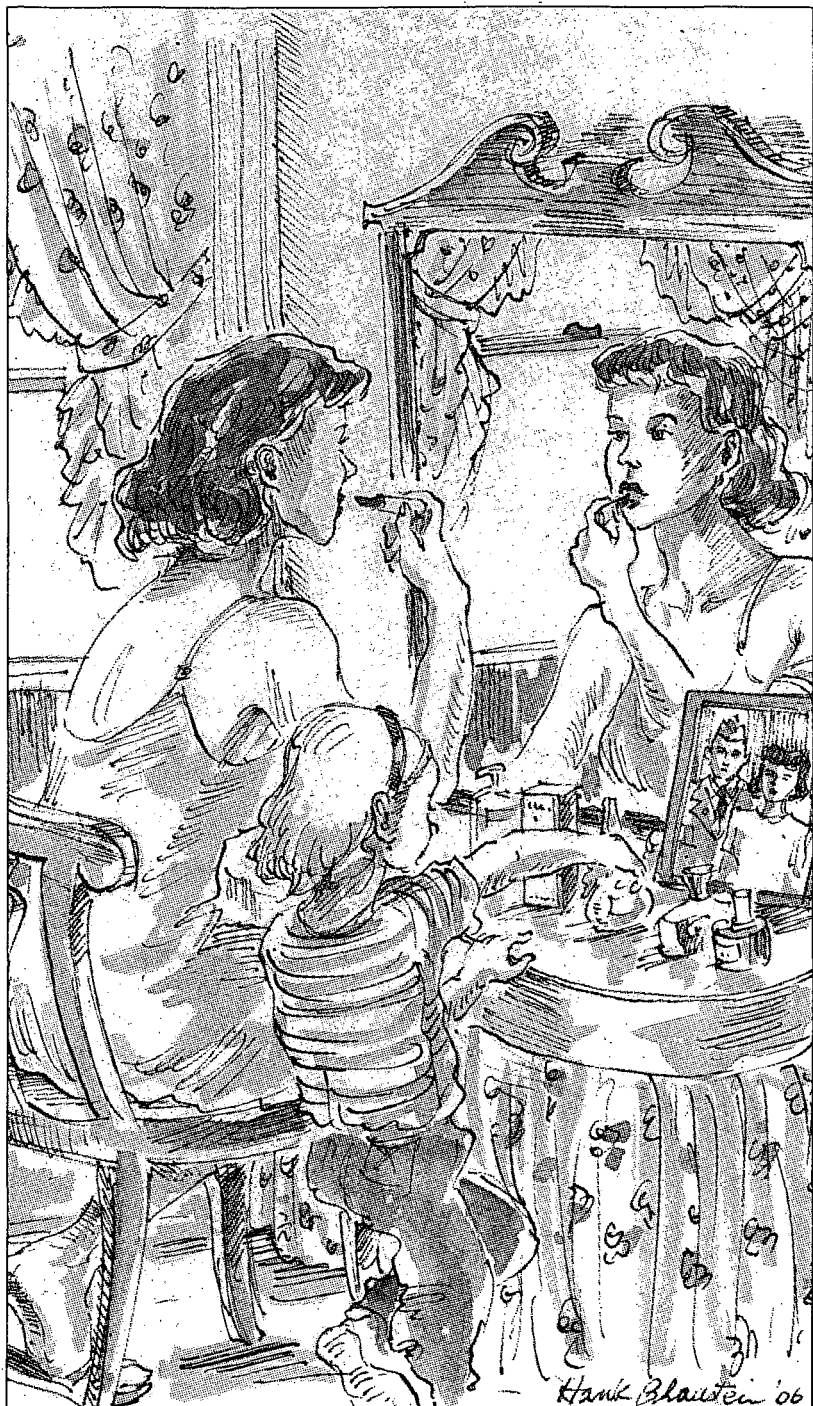
I flounce upstairs and yank open the dresser for those ugly woolen slacks, banging my anger, but not hard enough to bring Mama up with the fly swatter. (And how come *that* never gets put away for winter?)

With an almost physical jerk, I pull myself back to the present of 1965. I'm me again and getting irritable and if Beth slams the drawer just one more time, she's going to get a smack on the bottom.

You see? It's been like this since she was a toddler. My husband doesn't understand; but a girlfriend said recently, "I never liked my mother much till my daughter started glaring at me every time I spoke to her. Suddenly I understand." Yes.

And yet, somehow, that isn't exactly it. Not all of it anyhow. Even though I'm an adult now, safely married with a successful husband, comfortable house, and daughter of my own, it's only the child I once was that I fully understand, not Mama. I was probably no more aggravating than Beth, but these day-to-day flashes of irritation don't make me stop loving Beth. So why did Mama stop loving *me*?

Perhaps if she hadn't died the year I married Carter, Beth's birth could have bridged the unspoken distance between us. Or is the apparent warmth between most mothers and their grownup daughters only a mutual pretense while the politeness between



Mama and me is unavoidable reality?

Must Beth and I come to that?

I was four, almost five, when I learned not to take Mama's love for granted. Her moods were as uncertain as that wartime spring of 1945. There were moments of unquestioned security, but too often I would look up from play and see her watching me from a window, her eyes bleak with foreboding—almost as if I were a Nazi hand grenade primed to explode in her face.

Eventually, as the larger world groped its way back to sanity, so did my small one. My father came home from the Merchant Marine to stay, and by the time I was an adolescent, the stiffness between Mama and me was taken for granted. Yet even now, twenty years later, when Beth touches in me a sense of déjà vu and I look at myself/Mama through Beth's/my eyes, then I yearn for that barely-remembered closeness and again I wonder. . . .

Today I sit before the mirror in my bedroom, intent on getting my makeup exactly right. I'm meeting my husband for dinner and, like most men, Carter feels flattered when he thinks I've taken special pains just for him. Except for slipping into my new mini-skirted A-line, I can leave as soon as our teenaged neighbor gets home from school to sit with Beth.

Beth sprawls across my bed as she watches me in the mirror and whines halfheartedly about being left behind. She knows I won't relent and that Karen will indulge her most outrageous demands, but she has to keep her hand in. Her restless fingers flip the dial of my clock-radio, and as the serious tones of a newscast fill the room, I lift my hand to keep her from changing it. My favorite cousin is with the Seventh Fleet, but it isn't mentioned; and when I drop my hand, Beth turns to a rock station, muttering, "Why do they always have to have wars?"

Why? I echo silently. The newest Beatles song floods the room, but I'm lost in sudden memories of the staccato war bulletins that used to burst from our old radio and transfix the grownups in alert uneasiness. The words, urgent and tense and half-obsured with static, meant nothing to me; but that sudden adult fear made me afraid, too, without knowing why.

After, "God bless Mama and Daddy," I was taught to pray, "and bring Uncle Paul home safe from the war." But that was as much a part of the ritualistic ending as "and-make-me-a-good-girl-amen." Uncle Paul, Mama's younger brother, had been in Europe for three of my four years and I did not remember him. He was killed at Bastogne in December of 1944, although it was March before we knew for sure. When Mama put down the phone, I was

appalled. I'd never seen her cry, had never realized there were things that *could* make an adult cry.

Someone—I forget just who—put an arm around Mama and shooed me off to the candy store with a handful of pennies. That night Mama interrupted my prayers harshly. "Didn't you understand? Uncle Paul is *dead*!" And so I stopped praying for him, even though his deletion left a gap in the singsong formula that bothered me for months.

Eyes finished, I begin on my lips and Beth draws near to watch. She stands on one foot and leans against my bare shoulder, staring at me in the mirror objectively while her lips arc in unconscious imitation. Amused, I recall watching Mama put on her blood-red lipstick; but this is only another of those surface memories that color all our familiar actions when our children watch.

Bored, Beth goes to the window to look for Karen, then returns to play with the dozen or so perfume vials on my dressing table, souvenirs of all the foreign ports my cousin's ship has visited.

A schoolbus rumbles to a halt outside and the little glass bottles tinkle as Beth whirls away, dancing across the room to the window.

"Karen! Wait! I'm coming now!" she shrieks, and kisses me hastily. I hear her light footsteps patter on the stairs as I, too, call down to Karen with last-minute instructions.

Beth waves up to me as I stand at the window in my lace-trimmed slip; and although her smile is gay, though she leaves me without another backward look, skipping up to Karen and draping the older girl's sweater around her thin shoulders as she follows Karen across our wide lawn, I am suddenly filled with unbearable anguish and something colder.

Guilt?

Guilt at deserting my child?

Ridiculous! I'm as good a homemaker as Donna Reed, as devoted a mother as June Cleaver. Surely the few hours I'm away each week take nothing from Beth. Her father and I will be home before nine thirty. Carter doesn't like late hours or any music that rocks harder than Pat Boone's, and after six years of marriage, we don't exactly linger over candlelit tables.

But the feeling of guilt persists, overshadowed now by a growing sense of desolation so strong that I sit down before the mirror again, perplexed. Absently I straighten the perfume bottles Beth has muddled and see that one has come unstopped. It's a small cube of dark green porcelain, sprigged with minute red roses, and its heavy fragrance permeates down through layer after layer of

suppressed memories . . . *how incredible that I could have forgotten so completely!*

It arrived on a cold dreary day in early March when it seemed that winter would last forever. Mama took the box from the postman and knelt on the living room rug to tear it open. It'd been months since Daddy's last shore leave, and presents trickled back to us in lieu of the letters he never wrote.

I realize now that those presents must have been a pledge more to himself than to Mama and me that there was a time and world unbounded by gray North Atlantic waters and deadly U-boats. In later years he was such a silent, preoccupied, just-there father that I forgot how perceptive his gifts had been.

I asked him once to tell me how mermaids ran and was crushed when he explained the difference between the glittering mermaids I'd imagined and the grim actuality of the Murmansk Run. But weeks later, he sent back a tiny wooden mermaid scaled with golden sequins.

That day, Mama lifted the square green bottle from its nest of tissue and let me touch the exquisite ceramic roses. Then she smoothed some perfume on her bare white arms and lay back upon the rug, her eyes closed; and while chill March rains streamed down the windowpanes, the room filled with the heavy languorous scent of full-blown roses under a hot June sun.

"What does this say?" I asked, tickling her nose with the note that had fallen out. She opened her eyes, crossed them for my benefit, and read, "'This reminded me of the day we met.'"

"Didn't you always know Daddy?" I asked, as much in surprise as to prolong her mood.

"I was the original farmer's daughter," she answered flippily. She gazed around the spacious rooms with their deep rugs and polished tables and Sadie clattering out in the kitchen beyond many closed doors. "Luckily for me, he wasn't a traveling salesman."

I held my breath, hoping she would go on. She so seldom forgot that I was a child. She lay on the rug looking up at the ceiling with dreamy eyes and let me see her as she'd been that hot summer day when Daddy drove by in the first yellow convertible she'd ever seen.

Sweaty and barefoot, she'd just hoed to the end of a long tobacco row when Daddy tapped his horn and asked if he were on the Raleigh road. He wasn't, but before he could turn the car, its radiator boiled over.

"Your Uncle Paul was only sixteen and practically pushing his mule and plow down the furrow, just dying to see that car up close."

One good look at Mama with her long black hair hanging free beneath a faded straw hat, and Daddy couldn't seem to get his yellow convertible started.

He accepted Grampa's invitation to a cold glass of sweet tea and would have maneuvered to stay for supper if Uncle Paul, tempted beyond the limits of good manners, hadn't slipped down the lane in the growing dusk and started the car with no trouble. Mama walked down the land with him, pausing in the twilight to pick a cluster of Gran's climbing roses.

"They were still warm from the sun and your daddy took them and said he was sure he could get lost again the next week if he tried. Anyhow, we got married right after barning season."

She was eighteen.

It was better than a fairy tale and Daddy was Prince Charming. I was so full of love for them both that I hugged Mama hard. She squeezed me absently, then got up and stood before the mirror above our marble fireplace. She tucked stray ends of her black hair back into its smooth pageboy.

"I'm twenty-five years old and just look at me! My life's half over and nothing's happening. Oh, Libby, your daddy's been gone so long and this old war's never going to end. I'm so tired of being lonesome!"

I could have wept for her; but Sadie came in just then, her small frame draped in a long raincoat, to tell Mama our lunch was ready. With Daddy gone, there wasn't enough work to fill Sadie's day, so Mama made her leave at noon.

She would have dispensed with Sadie altogether if Daddy'd let her because she felt Sadie blamed her for all the changes the war had made: Daddy's absence, the parties no longer given, the other maids lured away by higher factory wages.

But things had been changing for our family long before this latest war. Once the whole northwest quadrant of town had been Watson land; now our house stood on less than a hundred acres of overgrown pasture and scrub woodland. A hundred acres out of all those thousands, and what had been an isolated country estate was increasingly threatened by gas stations, factories, and truck-filled highways as the town pushed north and west and began to act like a city.

As the youngest Watson, I didn't mind the encroachment. A ten minute walk along neglected bridle paths brought me out to the highway where a small general store sat between two truck depots. Sugar rationing or not, one glass case was always heaped with penny candy, and if I didn't have a penny, one of the drivers lounging there between runs would usually treat a little girl if she

looked wistful enough. At four-going-on-five, I'd barely heard of Shirley Temple or Margaret O'Brien, but already I knew instinctively how to lift my blue eyes to those male faces and get what I wanted.

That's where I met Jethridge. He gave me cinnamon jawbreakers and dizzying, heart-stopping rides on his Harley-Davidson motorcycle. In one truck yard, around the store, and back through the other yard. Most of the truckers were too old for the army, but Jethridge was youth and laughter and swaggering masculinity in a black leather jacket studded with bright nailheads and chips of red glass. He made a pet of me, and as I ran through the lane, jumped the ditch, and darted across the cement road, I always hoped he'd be there, back from Nashville, Atlanta, or Lexington.

He was there the day after Daddy's perfume came, and when I tripped on the doorsill and fell sprawling on the planked floor with a skinned knee, it was Jethridge who picked me up and took me home.

He placed me on the back of his glittering machine as if I were a princess and I clasped him tightly around his waist and laid my cheek against the cold leather of his jacket. It smelled of motor oil and hair tonic as we roared along the highway. He throttled down as we came to the end of our long driveway into the yard, but Mama heard and came out onto the porch.

"Carry me," I coaxed and was swooped up in his arms again. For one aching moment, I longed for my own daddy; then Mama was there with worried questions as Jethridge carried me into the house.

She removed a splinter and cleaned my knee, but before she could ease him out of the house with polite dismissive thanks, I put on my prissiest Watson manners, which always amused her. "You must allow us to repay your courtesy, Jethridge."

That was the first time, and if Sadie didn't approve of serving coffee to leather-jacketed truck drivers in our living room, she kept it to herself.

Or tried to.

Jethridge must have noticed, though, for when he stopped by to ask how I was the next day, it was after Sadie had gone.

Mama sparkled that afternoon, gayer than I'd seen her since Daddy left, and her dimples flashed when Jethridge said, "Now I see where Libby gets her charm." I made him tell her my favorite trucking stories, and Mama laughed as much as I did.

I was central and necessary those first few days until the phone call about Uncle Paul made Mama cry. When I returned from the store with my candy, something in the relationship had shifted—a sudden tension in the air which didn't include me. Later,

though, as I lay in bed, their voices floated up the stairwell and I could hear Mama's careless laughter and the familiar swagger in Jethridge's tones. The whole house seemed to drift on a sea of warm June roses and I fell asleep reassured.

April set a new pattern for our days: Mama no longer let me go to the store, but Jethridge made up for it by spending most of his layover times with us. Soon after Sadie left each day, we'd hear the pop of his motorcycle and I'd race across our wide porch and down the steps to fling myself upon him and rifle his pockets for the jawbreakers he kept stashed for me. Then he'd swing me up behind him, and we'd roar through the old bridle paths, avoiding Sadie's cottage on the far side of the land, to end up in a skid by the porch where Mama waited with mocking laughter. "Four-year-olds, the both of you!"

At first Mama refused to ride behind him. "It's not ladylike," she protested; or, "Can you imagine what Sadie would say if she saw me?"

We hooted at the thought of Sadie's face, but Jethridge teased her and eventually she even managed to ride alone—never very expertly, but she could wobble down to the end of our long drive, circle awkwardly, and return without falling. She was so competent with the little red coupe Daddy had given her when I was born that I couldn't understand her ineptitude, but Jethridge seemed charmed and corrected her mistakes indulgently. Then Mama would shrug prettily and declare that only a man could handle such a monstrous machine.

Late in April, he left for a four-day haul to Nashville, and as Mama and I waved goodbye from the porch, I squeezed her hand and said, "Aren't you glad I found Jethridge? You're not lonesome any more, are you?"

She jerked her hand away with a strange look, then kneeling beside me and talking very fast, she explained that Jethridge was *my* friend—she let him visit only because I liked him so much. Did I understand? Her hands hurt as she grasped my shoulders, and I nodded, too scared by her sudden intensity to speak.

Mama changed after that. The house no longer smelled of warm roses. Spring was upon us and soon Daddy would be home again, but I felt confused and often caught Mama looking at me as if I were about to do something horrible.

Jethridge changed, too. He still came, but he had no laughter and no time for me. I was turned out of the house to play in the sun or hide myself under the Cape Jessamine bushes and brood on what I'd done to make them hate me.

One early May night, a roll of thunder from a spring storm awakened me. It sounded like Nazi bombers, and I'd just opened my door to go to Mama when I heard her voice, no longer low and sweet but edged with the new sharpness she used on me. Jethridge's words were soft and coaxing but hers shrilled above them. "Leave all this for some white-trash bungalow while you're on the road half of your life? Don't be as childish as Libby!"

Lightning flashed outside as matching anger rose in his voice. I crept back to bed, pulled the covers over my head to shut out both storms, and wished that the next roll of thunder really would be Nazi bombers so Jethridge could be brave and rescue us and make Mama like him again.

I must have dozed off, because when next I sat up in bed, all was quiet downstairs. The rain had dwindled to a steady drizzle, but I heard the sound of Mama's car as lights swept briefly across my bedroom ceiling. From my window, I heard the motor go silent in the drive below and the door quietly open and close. I waited to hear her come up the porch steps but long minutes passed. Suddenly I realized that Jethridge, too, must have been there in the dark shadows beyond her car, for I heard his Harley-Davidson splutter several times before catching.

Kneeling by the window, I saw its red taillight wobble unsteadily down our long straight drive and disappear in the rain.

And still Mama did not appear.

At last I crept out to the landing, feeling strange and lonely. Viewed through the railings, the big rooms below were shadowy and frightening in their emptiness, and one of Grandmother Watson's Chinese lamps was lying on the floor, its silk shade torn and the bulb splintered upon the rug.

I huddled on the landing, afraid to go down and even more afraid to go back to my dark room. I must have slept again because Mama woke me as she was tucking me into my own bed. I clung to her, sobbing, and felt her hair hanging in cold wet-strings-like-a soaked floor mop. Her cool skin smelled faintly of gasoline.

"You left me," I sobbed. "You and Jethridge went away and I was all alone."

"Little goose," she soothed. "Jethridge left *hours* ago, right after you went to bed. And I didn't leave you. I just ran outside to bring in the lawn chair cushions before the rain spoiled them."

"But the lamp," I quavered, confused. "I didn't break it, Mama. It was just lying there. Honest."

"There's nothing wrong with the lamp. You've had a bad dream. You always have bad dreams when it thunders. Remember? Go back to sleep now and forget all about it."

In the bright sunlight of morning, the night's strangeness really did seem like a bad dream. The Chinese lamp was in its accustomed place, bulb intact; and if there was a neatly mended tear in the silk shade, well, many things had been repaired instead of replaced during the endless war.

By the time Sadie arrived that morning, Mama had begun a sudden orgy of spring cleaning. Even after Sadie left, Mama kept cleaning, and Jethridge did not come.

That afternoon I sneaked over to the store with the last pennies he'd given me. Afterwards, Mama heard me crying under the Cape Jessamines. At the store they'd talked of Jethridge's death—how this beautiful Harley-Davidson must have skidded at that bad curve on Ridge Road during the thunderstorm and plunged down the hillside. A terrible accident, they said. Just terrible.

Mama's hand clenched my arm as I sobbed out my news. One of her pretty red fingernails was broken into the quick and I remembered that it was broken like that when she soothed away my bad dream. Yet as soon as I told her what the men said about Jethridge's terrible accident, the tightness went out of her fingers and she forgot to spank me for going to the store.

By the time Daddy came home, she was almost her old self; but if her face froze when I was prattling to my father, then I would choose my words with care.

Fear that she would tell him whatever it was that I'd done wrong those past few months made me avoid any references to that time and I buried Jethridge so deeply that only the smell of sun-warmed roses could—

"Aren't you going?" asks Beth from the doorway and before I think, I hiss, "What are you doing here, you sneaking little—"

Suddenly everything snaps back into focus.

"Sorry, honey," I smile. "I was daydreaming and you startled me."

She hugs me in relief. We find the toy she came back for and I kiss her goodbye again.

So *that's* all it was!

Poor stupid Mama! How incredibly careless to let a four-year-old witness her one shabby little affair. But what a stroke of luck for her that Jethridge was killed when their romance turned sour, before Sadie found out for sure. Remembering the man's swaggering confidence, I doubt if he'd have let Mama go back to being a proper Watson wife without a messy scandal.


If it weren't so pathetic, I could almost laugh with relief to know finally, after so many years of wondering, that the coldness between Mama and me wasn't something Beth and I need ever endure.

I'll have to be careful, though, about lashing out at Beth like that again. She's not me and I'm not Mama, but neither is she a baby any more. I mustn't let her become puzzled or uneasy—she and Carter are much too close.

I glance at the diamond-rimmed watch Carter gave me on our fifth anniversary. Nearly four. Already?

Carter expects me at seven. Even if I hurry, I'll only have two hours with Mitch and he'll probably spend most of it sulking and going on and on about how I put my reputation above his love. He's really getting tiresome. I could almost wish *he* had a Harley-Davidson so I could . . .

Oh my sweet Jesus!

Mama? 

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

PDF BYKMP PYLF Y FRFK MXT DYL TXM TDFI DF
BGS HHFC BFFP BYKMP SQP SB PDXP AGSMFP, CFXC
XM X LXANFKFG.

—ESDI D. CYKANU

CIPHER: _____

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 39

THE STORY THAT WON

The May Mysterious Photograph contest was won Doug Turnbull of Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Honorable mentions go to Kent Ostby of Marietta, Georgia; Thomas H. Beaven, of Garden City, Michigan; Mike Befeler of Boulder, Colorado; Arthur C. Carey of Fremont, California; A. W. Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota; Jan Streilein of Aiken, South Carolina; Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; James A. W. Shaw of Tucson, Arizona; Richard Howard of Conway, Arkansas; and Judith Fawley of Pensacola, Florida.



Laurie & Charles/Photonical/Getty Images

BUNNY LAUNDERING

DOUG TURNBULL

“Once a month, seven months,” Officer Elmer Fudge grumbled, as he bumped his cruiser against the curb. *Always happens on the worst side of town, down the bumpiest street, in the worst weather*, he thought miserably. Drawing his jacket over his head, Fudge climbed from the vehicle, splashed through the heavy rain, getting a quick soaker from a pothole, before entering the laundromat where the latest robbery had taken place.

Officer Freleng, already on the scene, was speaking with the female clerk.

A large bunny had tied her up, Fudge knew. *Funny*. Then the bunny had robbed the place. *Not so funny. Wasn't playing with a full bushel of carrots, this thief*, Fudge thought, jacket dripping on the grungy tile.

Freleng approached.

“Anything?” Fudge asked.

Freleng shrugged. “Same. Long ears, white furry body, glassy eyes. Clerk says she came from a bathroom break. Our perp stood here by the dryers holding a knife.”

Fudge chewed his lip. *No fingerprints again, no other witnesses, another clean getaway in another storm.*

Kneeling down by a dryer, he eyed—“A white hair!”

“DNA?” Freleng joked.

Holding it under the stark fluorescent lights, Fudge smiled. *Think like a rabbit in the worst weather* . . .

“A road crew’s one street over,” he said. *I drove by it*, he thought. “No workers today; not in this. Our bunny’s smart, he’s going down rabbit holes to avoid his hunters.”

Freleng smacked his forehead. “Manholes!”

“Let’s go. Two lucky rabbit feet say I’m hoppin’ in the right direction.”

ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE **HITCHCOCK**

Linda Landrigan
EDITOR

Nicole K. Sia
EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Susan Kendrioski
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
ART AND PRODUCTION

Carole Dixon
SENIOR PRODUCTION MANAGER

Evira Matos
PRODUCTION ASSOCIATE

Victoria Green
SENIOR ART DIRECTOR

Shirley Chan Levi
ART PRODUCTION ASSOCIATE

Abigail Browning
MANAGER, SUBSIDIARY RIGHTS
AND MARKETING

Bruce W. Sherbow
VICE PRESIDENT,
SALES AND MARKETING

Sandy Marlowe
CIRCULATION SERVICES

Julia McEvoy
MANAGER, ADVERTISING SALES

Connie Goon
ADVERTISING SALES COORDINATOR

Peter Kanter
PUBLISHER

www.TheMysteryPlace.com

COMING IN
DECEMBER 2006

No Videotaping
During the Murder

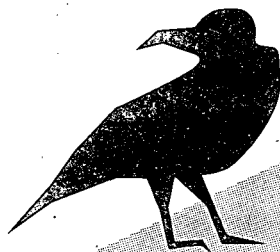
John H. Dirckx

The Sweet Science

John F. Dobbyn

False Keys

R. T. Lawton



DIRECTORY OF SERVICES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Editorial Offices

475 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10016

Subscription Services

(800) 220-7443
www.themysteryplace.com

Change of Address & Subscription Inquiries

www.themysteryplace.com
Or send your current mailing label
and new address to:

AHMM
6 Prowitt Street
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220
Address problems to
Sandy Marlowe at
smarlowe@pennypublicatons.com

Back Issues

Send check for \$5.00 per issue
(\$7.00 per issue outside the U.S.) to:
AHMM
6 Prowitt Street, Suite 100
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220
Please specify which issue
you are ordering.

Subrights & Permissions

licensing@pennypublications.com
Or fax inquiries to (212) 686-7414

Newsstand Sales

Dell Magazines, Department NS
6 Prowitt Street
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220
(203) 866-6688
newsstand@pennypublications.com

Advertising Representative

Connie Goon, Advertising Sales Coordinator
475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016
Tel: (212) 686-7188 ■ Fax: (212) 686-7414
adsales@dellmagazines.com
(Display & Classified Advertising)

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE (ISSN:0002-5224), Vol. 51, No. 11, November, 2006. Published monthly except for combined January/February and July/August double issues by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription \$43.90 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$53.90 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Or, to subscribe, call 1-800-220-7443. Editorial Offices: 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. Executive Offices: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT, and additional mailing offices. © 2006 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Dell is a trademark registered in the U.S. Patent Office. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express written permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. In Canada return to Quebecor St. Jean, 800 Blvd. Industrial, St. Jean, Quebec J3B 8G4. GST #R123054108.

Printed in Canada

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Alfred Hitchcock November 2006

Advertise to the world's largest mystery magazine audience with our Alfred Hitchcock/Elery Queen combined classified section. Ad rates per issue: \$4.95 per word (10 word minimum), \$350 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). Special introductory offer: Buy two ads and receive a third ad FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, New York 10016. Direct inquiries to: (212) 686-7188; Fax: (212) 686-7414; or email: adsales@dellmagazines.com

AUTHORS

ENEMY MINE, All books in print, Check:
www.barryblongyear.com

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

Marlowe's Mysteries. Mystery books and more, for the collector and reader.
www.marlowesmysteries.com.

Send for free catalog of mystery and detective fiction. Canford Books, Drawer 216E, Freeville, NY 13068

INTERNET

NEW MYSTERY WEBSITE
STORIES, REVIEWS, AND MORE
WWW.MYSTERYWEEKLY.COM

TRAVEL/TOURS

MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE 19th annual
MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE, April 29, 2007.
Ten day Mediterranean cruise aboard Holland
America's ms Veendam. Call CruiseWorks -
1 800 876-6664

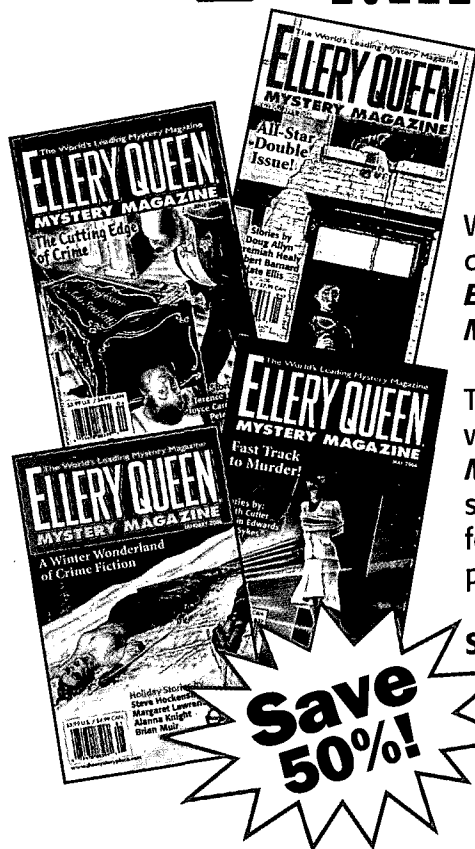
Are You Moving?

Please direct all change of address or other subscription inquiries to AHMM, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. For change of address, please advise six to eight weeks before moving. Please send us your current mailing label and new address.



4 MYSTERY MAGAZINES

just \$5.95!



When it comes to knock-'em-dead detection, nobody outdoes ***Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine***.

To introduce you to the award-winning fiction of ***Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine***, we'd like to send you a special value pack of four favorite issues for just \$5.95 plus shipping.

Special introductory offer.

To get your value pack, fill out the coupon below and mail it to us with your payment today.

DELL MAGAZINES

Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☒ **YES!** Please send me my **Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine Value Pack**. I get 4 back issues for just \$5.95 plus \$2 shipping and handling (\$7.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My satisfaction is fully guaranteed! My payment of \$_____ is enclosed. (EQPK04)

Name: _____
(Please print)

Address: _____

City: _____

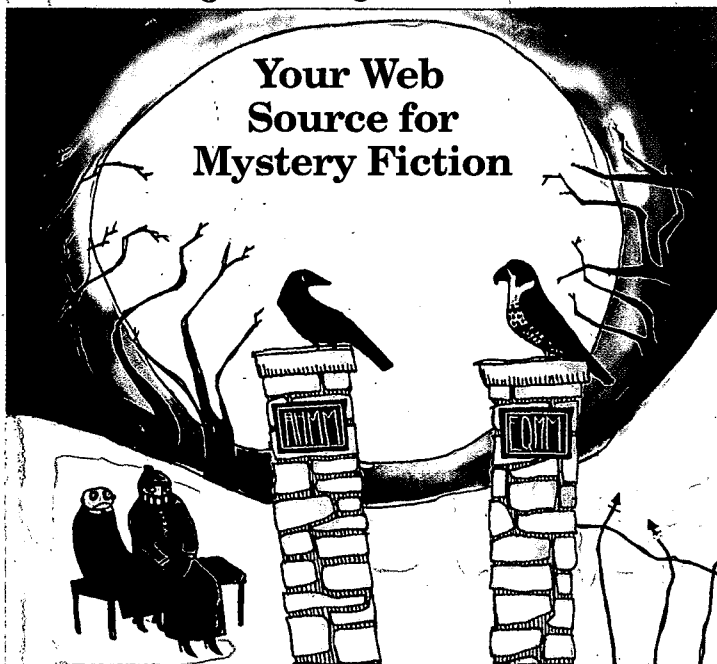
State: _____ **ZIP:** _____

Please make checks payable to Dell Magazines Direct. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Offer expires 12/31/07.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

56C-NHQLV2

TheMysteryPlace.com



Visit www.TheMysteryPlace.com, home of the world's leading short-fiction mystery magazines. Log on and enjoy:

- Excerpts of current stories from the genre's leading authors
- Awards lists
- Book reviews
- Readers' Forum
- Mystery puzzles

All this and much more!

ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE
HITCHCOCK®

ELLERY QUEEN®
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Visit us at www.themysteryplace.com